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EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis/Project

HELPING THE LAND HELP PEOPLE KNOW GOD:  
TOWARDS A THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

BY

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*To the glory of God  
and the cloud of relationships that are Emery House,  
in particular my deep gratitude for Windy,  
mother of our daughters and  
love of my life.*





Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION..... 1

    WHY?..... 3

    WHY BOTHER? ..... 4

    HAS THIS NOT BEEN DONE BEFORE? ..... 6

    WHAT DOES A THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE LOOK LIKE? ..... 9

CHAPTER 1      AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING ..... 15

    THE GREAT COMMANDMENT ..... 18

    CREATION REVISITED ..... 21

    A HOLE IN THE DOME OF THE HEAVENS ..... 26

    BEGINNING TO PRACTICE A NEW COSMOLOGY ..... 32

    ONWARD TO SACRAMENT ..... 45

CHAPTER 2      THE SACRAMENTAL UNIVERSE..... 47

    THE MEANING OF SACRAMENT ..... 52

    THE COSMIC CHRIST..... 55

    THE SACRAMENT OF THE PRESENT MOMENT ..... 59

    A SACRAMENTAL UNIVERSE ..... 64

    BEHOLD WHAT YOU ARE AND THE PRACTICE OF SACRAMENTAL LIVING ..... 69

CHAPTER 3      ON THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE ..... 76

    THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE ..... 80

    WALKING THE ONE TRUE PATH ..... 85

*Mimicking Nature*..... 87

*Balance*..... 92

*Plant Positive, not Pest Negative* ..... 98

*Harvest Only the Abundance*..... 101

    EFFICIENCY, PRODUCTIVITY AND *REALITY*..... 104

CHAPTER 4      HELPING THE LAND HELP PEOPLE KNOW GOD..... 111

    THE FARM ..... 116

    THE WITNESS..... 121

*Building Community with Food: The CSA at Emery House* ..... 122

*Learning and Living Together: The Internship*..... 124

*Agricultural Learning* ..... 128

*Ora et Labora: Integrating Retreat Ministry* ..... 132

*If you build it... : Inviting the Community*..... 132

*The Lord’s Acre: Feeding the Hungry* ..... 134

AFTERWORD ..... 136

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 138



## Introduction

Carrying my two month-old daughter through the stubble of the southern corn field up to the vegetable field, a warm late Fall sun shines on our faces and the wind whips the last few broccoli plants that still are sending out florets. It is a beautiful day, probably the last of the year that will allow for short sleeves. Windy, my wife, is on an errand with our two- and- a- half- year old, leaving Brigid and I to appreciate the morning together. She is sleeping, so I walk deliberately, keeping the sunlight out of her closed eyes as best as possible and not stopping or stooping or trying to get one more thing done. I do not walk these fields this way enough; slowly, watchfully, just being, but when I do I remember the reason why we are here.

I am, with Windy and our daughters Hannah Maeve and Brigid, caretaker of Emery House. This place is a monastery, a retreat ministry of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopal monastic order and our employer. The beauty of these one hundred odd acres cannot be exaggerated. Bordered to the North by the wide Merrimac River, the East by the dammed and meandering Artichoke River, the South and East by 350 year old granite walls, the land radiates out from the yellow hilltop farm house built in 1745. The system of fields, forests, wetlands, tidal marshes and river's edge bluffs unify into what Rudolf Steiner would call an "individuality" a place coherent as an ecosystem to the extent that it is lived in and with as an organism. The old bell calls brothers and guests to prayer, while others work in the fields, and neighbors make their daily walks along the Emery Lane. A spirit/radiates out from this place as it does from





all places, from all living or intrinsically beautiful things, but at Emery House, The Spirit glows; you can taste it. My family's job is to keep it that way, and make it better.

The seed catalogues piling up on my desk signal the coming of our fifth growing season here at Emery House. My experience of life has not accommodated a relationship with God to which I can ascribe much cause and effect. But my path to this place, to this key board on this old oak desk surrounded by 300- year- old horsehair plaster listening to the wind whistle through what might be the best Catalpa tree in the Commonwealth, is in no uncertain terms providential.

As my Saturn returned, that mysterious age of 29 that finds Saturn in the same position as at the time of your birth, I experienced a series of invitations that now and in this place, are finding satisfaction. First, the deep fog I had waded through my whole life began to lift and a ray of God's light shined through. I knew that the world was not what I thought it was and I had to respond. This took the form most visibly in my falling in love with Windy. Then, on Easter morning in a tiny parish in Somerset, England, I felt with no doubt in my being and no clue what it meant, a call to ordained ministry. Finally, the faith of a friend in me put me to work on the land, first on a tractor working hay as I had in high school, and then on a plot of silty loam bottom land that had not been plowed in 70 years that Windy and I could call our own. In Amherst, Massachusetts I found myself, the former Marine Corps tank officer and ex-corporate operative, a larval farmer who was trying to clean the scales from his eyes while preparing to enter seminary in the care of the Unitarians.



Four years of divinity school, at Harvard even more surprisingly, transformed me into a religious, even a Christian person. I grew dimly aware of the depths and sources of the world's mysterious majesty. I found words to engage the sacramental nature of our universe, with its ceaseless flow of invitations to encounter God in each and every moment. I found solace and strength in the Anglican tradition and the Episcopal Church. With the help of the Church and in particular a community of Episcopal monks, I found the tools and was given the permission and encouragement to learn to practice living in relation God in Christ in the knowledge of the creation that was being revealed to me. My work in libraries, classrooms, parishes and small plots of New England soil integrated with a life of prayer in each of these same places, and in this, a vocation, a ministry and a farm were born. This is how Brigid and I found our way to the broccoli growing at Emery House.

## **Why?**

The purpose of writing the thesis that follows is to begin to lay a theological foundation for a Christian practice of sustainable agriculture. My goal in laying this foundation is two-fold. First, I hope to help restore to our religious consciousness the pre-historical centrality of agricultural ecology, that is that our knowledge and experience of God and all practice of religion is inseparable from the foundational systems that make human civilization possible; our agriculture. Second, I hope to demonstrate the sacramental nature of the temporal world, illuminate the invitation we have to participate in God, and offer access to the riches of the theological, philosophical, practical and





communal/traditions of Christianity to those involved in the practice of agriculture. If farmers approached farming as the faithful approach the sacrament of the Eucharist, it could be nothing but sustainable. To cross-pollinate the church and the farm, bringing an eco-agricultural consciousness to the church and a catholic, sacramental consciousness to the farm; this is my objective.

## **Why Bother?**

Human civilization and each individual human life and is utterly dependent on the practice of agriculture. Without a reliable and regenerative source of food and fiber, a civilization is impossible to maintain and the lives of members of those civilizations are impossible to preserve. Farm or die. As we deepen our understanding of our species' impact on the planet's ecosystems, it is ever more clear that the lives of each of us and of the possibility of continued human civilization are at grave risk if we do not learn to live in right relationship with the systems that make life and civilization possible.

Agriculture, the basic system of life, involves more land, consumes more resources, and generates more carbon than any other human activity. The world's agricultural system is currently unsustainable. We must farm or die, but if we keep farming as we are, we will also die.

In the continuous quest for progress that the Western world has adopted as an *a priori* good, a crushing loss we as a species have suffered is the divorce of our relationship with God and our relationship with workings of the world. This divorce has particular poignancy when it comes to the matter of agriculture. Though we are proud as a nation that only 1% of our population "needs" to be engaged in agriculture to feed us



all, agriculture is as critical to our survival now as it was when human civilization began its evolution. In fact, the roots of human civilization were set down in the act of forging dependent relationships between us, humans, and other life forms. Our ancestors pledged to protect and help propagate certain plants and animals in exchange for those plants and animals fulfilling human needs of food and fiber. Civilization could never have developed had our ancestors not cultivated relationships that promised a predictable portion of the Earth's abundance to those who cooperated with it. In this our civilization found its sustenance and the lens through which all meaning was made.

The mysteries of life were as great then as they are now, and the awe and fear inspired by fertility, death, abundance, famine, weather, cycles of seasons, flood and drought, and the mundanity and joy of labor, each elemental categories of the human encounter with the rest of temporal existence, called forth from human consciousness a need to make meaning in relation to these systems and the human social systems that began to evolve alongside the founding of agriculture. The human compulsion to make meaning found its first organized manifestation in relation to the cycles of agriculture and patterns of life that these cycles demanded. Agrarianism is the foundation of religion, and for unknown thousands of years, our ancestors strove to understand the world in terms of and with language dictated by the ecological systems on which civilization, and all of the encompassed human life, depended. Our religious systems were inseparable from the ecological systems of life, most particularly in the portion of the ecosystem we had the most say about, our agriculture.





Sadly, for reasons we will explore more deeply in Chapter 1, our religious systems/became separated from our physical systems of survival, and our journey to relationship with God diverged from our quest to know the world. In this, hundreds of generations of our ancestral, instinctual knowledge of the interconnectedness of life, the divinity of living things and living systems, and the holy obligation to live in balanced, right relationship with the world have faded into obscurity. I do not believe that I am being overly dramatic or alarmist in writing that if we cannot reconnect our spiritual consciousness to the reality of our ecological condition, that is to our interdependent relationship with all of creation, we as a species are doomed to fail. In a failure such as this, we are bound to bring much of the world as we know it with us into the abyss. Joyfully, it is not too late.

### **Has This Not Been Done Before?**

The short answer is, “Not exactly.” I do not claim to be founding a new sub-field of theology, but my research has not revealed systematic theological approaches to sustainable agriculture. We do not want for a vast literature of sustainable agriculture, or of an ecological approach to theology, both fields are large and growing. However, neither is currently sufficient to the task of synthesizing an understanding of God and agriculture

It warms my farming heart that sustainable agriculture is enjoying a renaissance. This includes not just the growth in sustainable agrarian enterprises (last year Massachusetts saw the first net increase in working farms in a generation), but also the abundance of thinking, writing and interest in the ideas surrounding the practice of



sustainable agriculture. The literature of sustainable agriculture finds its starting point generally in ecological, agronomic, moral/ethical, or political economic terms. We need diversity in our ways of knowing, and the field of theology is immeasurable enriched by inquiry rooted in these starting points.

Similarly, the world of contemporary Christian theology has bequeathed us with riches in the field of eco-theology, an approach to God enlivened by ecological and cosmological understanding, ecology being the study of art and science of relationship and cosmology being the study of the totality of the universe. The importance of approaching God and an understanding of God in light of our blossoming ecological and cosmological knowledge could not possibly be overstated.

My project is to bridge the gap that exists between the former and the latter. Non-theological approaches,<sup>1</sup> while often embracing a healthy sense of Mystery in embracing a humble posture regarding humankind's ability to understand and control the world, and often founded upon an understanding of the interconnectedness of existence, where human health, ecological stability, justice, freedom and dignity are inseparable,<sup>2</sup> generally are lacking in a fundamental depth of inquiry that is essential to realigning cultures. Most importantly, these approaches lack the foundational resources (or inclination) to delve into the world of meaning making. Discussion of the ontological

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<sup>1</sup> I resist using the word "secular" in describing non-theological approaches to sustainable agriculture, as I see no boundary between things concerning God (sacred) and things not (secular). This is perhaps the central point of this thesis; all things fundamentally concern God.

<sup>2</sup> Joel Salatin, a noted farmer, writer and speaker, provided an excellent example of this form of integration at a lecture I heard him give. He spoke of the hazards of a culture that treats living things as commodities, reflecting on our culture that allows for concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO) "A culture that does not respect the pig-ness of a pig will surely not respect the Tom-ness of Tom or the Mary-ness of Mary." (Joel Salatin, *Food, Farms and Families*, Northeast Organic Farmer's Association Winter Conference, Worcester, January 16, 2010).





realities and consequences of life are generally missing in non-theological approaches to sustainable agriculture. By skipping over questions of the nature of reality, it is difficult to locate the sources of some basic assumptions made in the creation of such systems. What is the nature of life and how might we begin to understand it? From whence does our ability to discern right from wrong arise, and by what authority may we act in light of this discernment? Non-theological approaches are largely confined to considerations of the temporal world, which is absolutely important, but is not the whole picture.

Conversely, most eco-theology I have encountered fails to transcend the theory-practice barrier when it comes to the actual physical application of an ecologically informed ontology. Broad principles such as practicing gratitude, approaching God and creation in terms of holistic/web-like models of understanding, and outlining expansive ethical frameworks are important to theoretical understanding and the practice of living in right relationship with God in the world, but fall short in helping us integrate a full understanding of the ontological *and* agro-ecological consequences of using, for example, a synthetic fungicide to address an outbreak of Late Blight in a tomato planting on which our ability to pay for heating oil this winter depends; or how we might and must discern the face of Christ very specifically in the ancient American polyculture system called the Three Sisters, where squash, corn and beans cooperate in a way so efficient and magical that the indigenous people of the Americas thrived for thousands of years without the benefit of the wheel. Eco-theology provides tools to make meaning, but when it comes to tools with which to survive, not so much.





## **What Does a Theology and Practice of Sustainable Agriculture Look Like?**

I make no claim to have constructed a comprehensive theology of sustainable agriculture. I have not been farming or writing long enough to even consider this as a goal, if such a goal could even possibly be achieved. The most glaring gap that I see in this thesis is my inability to sufficiently answer my two year-old daughter's question about why we killed all of our turkey's. I have killed millions of weeds, billions of insects, trillions of microorganisms and a few dozen turkeys and chickens without a fully formed theology of that action. I have some ideas, but I am not convinced yet, and yet I will keep killing and keep eating meat. This issue, the un-comprehensiveness of the theology I am laying forth is not an aside or a disclaimer, but rather is critically illustrative of the base reality of the subject matter. Agriculture, and the decisions we make about the practice of agriculture is absolutely a matter of life and death. The lives of the plants, animals, microorganisms, fungi and other forms of life we have yet to describe in our agricultural ecosystems, in addition to our own lives and the lives of our families and everyone we have ever known are dependent on agricultural decisions. That agriculture has reached levels of imbalance that contributes to the conditions that threaten civilization's ability to continue further reinforces the importance of our decision making. These are very real things. Fortunately, for the faithful God is the most real thing knowable, so the path has been laid before us.

For the starting point of this investigation, I follow the lead of the Hebrew Scriptures and begin in the beginning, with Genesis and the story of creation. It is, I contend in Chapter 1, a faulty understanding of our cosmological foundation that has led



us down the wrong path to where we stand now. The writers of Genesis 1 – 2.1 would have us believe that God in God's self, in a soupy, menacing condition of pre-existent Chaos, hollowed out a space in which reality occurs. But looking to the Gospels, and walking through the pages of the book of nature, I think that perhaps they got it all wrong. What if that Chaos out there is not something to be walled off, but is in fact the true nature of things? What if the Light of Christ shines most brightly down the path towards knowing that there are no walls, no domes, that relationship, interconnectedness and interdependency, as the doctrine of the Trinity intimates, is the true nature of reality? This is ecosystem consciousness, and when we follow Christ's commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves with this consciousness, our understanding of *neighbor* transcends our human neighbor to include the whole neighborhood that encompasses all sentient beings, all matter, processes, communities, and systems that dance together in the swirling round we call the universe. If we understood the world this way, would not everything be different? At least on the farm?

From this ontological foundation, that the nature of reality and the nature of God is wholly different that we may have been led to believe, I attempt in Chapter 2 to describe a way to understand not only our participation in God, but also how to frame the ceaseless invitation we have to encounter God in the creation in terms of *sacrament*. For the glory of God and the survival of our planet, or at for at least a sustainable agriculture, the world must be related to in terms of sacrament, that is as a ceaseless occasion for an actual and eternal encounter with God. I posit that as God is as God is, so the world is as it is, and the vocation of humanity, if we are to live in accordance with the will of God, is





to encounter God in the world, discern God's will, and in cooperation with our neighbors (the ecosystems we inhabit), do God's will. Jean-Pierre de Caussaude's vision of the sacrament of the present moment and William Temple's notion of a sacramental universe, help to liberate the concept of sacramental living from the confines of the Church to the practice of living in the world. This is the Christian heart of a theology of sustainable agriculture.

In Chapter 3, I lay out some principles of how to discern and follow God's will in this sacramental world. The great American folk-singer and political radical Utah Phillips once said, "following path of least resistance is what makes the river run crooked."<sup>3</sup> Following the path of least resistance in all we do, from living in intimate relationship with a spouse, to cooperating with a soil system to produce crops, to understanding our relationship to energy, debt and work, the path of least resistance leads us in the way of God in Christ, and into the posture of gentle, sustainable existence that God will us to be in.

With the fourth chapter I attempt to demonstrate how the theology laid out above could be enacted on the ground. Human work in the world, at its very best, is a living prayer. The visioning and work towards an agriculture on the path of least resistance at Emery House, our monastery home, is our prayer. In this final chapter I outline our dreams, plans, culture, care, joys, concerns and barriers to the praxis of eco-theological farming. Speaking in specific terms about our ecosystem, growing culture, internship program, relationship to our human neighbors and plans for progress, I offer a snapshot

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<sup>3</sup> Utah Phillips, "Natural Resources" performed by Utah Phillips and Ani DiFranco, *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, m4a downloaded from iTunes, Righteous Babe Records, 1996.



of what we are attempting in hopes of helping other see that living/farming in accordance to a belief system is possible. Also, if any with wisdom or experience greater than mine see holes in these plans, I beg of you, please contact me. The doors of Emery House are always open to fellow travelers.

Conspicuously absent from this introduction, and the rest of this thesis, is the word *organic*. The word organic was probably first applied to agriculture by Sir Walter Northbourne in his now classic *Look to the Land*, published in 1940.<sup>4</sup> Here, he describes “organic versus chemical farming”, with the concept of organic denoting a holistic or systemic approach, sensing a farm to be an organism of myriad components. This is a wise use of the word *organic* in reference to agriculture.

The passage of the Federal Organic Foods Production of 1990, from which the USDA Certified Organic labeling program unveiled in 2002 stems, distorted the word *organic* beyond repair.<sup>5</sup> Much food that has qualified to be labeled *organic* is grown on farms and distributed through systems that are anything but sustainable. Through the intense lobbying efforts of multi-national commodity and food processing corporations, “certified organic” refers primarily to the inputs allowed on a farm with little emphasis on the culture of the crop. A small, diversified farm that uses the full compliment of petro-chemical inputs is generally more in balance with the true nature of things than a thousand acre “organic” monoculture of tomatoes or lettuce in California’s Central Valley. In a

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<sup>4</sup> Lord Northbourne *Look to the Land* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2003), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Heckman “A History of Organic Farming: Transitions from Sir Albert Howard's War in the Soil to the USDA National Organic Program” *Wise Traditions*: 7, no. 4 (Winter 2006), <http://www.trit.us/farming/history/history-organic-farming.html> (accessed 22 January 2010).





marketplace offering “organic” Doritos, the word has lost any usefulness and makes the description of the variety of agri-cultures difficult.<sup>6</sup>

Terms such as eco-agriculture, biological agriculture, biodynamic and natural or naturally grown are unregulated, require significant explanation, and may or may not allow for appropriate use of technology, such as in the case of Integrated Pest Management (IPM), a system of applying pesticides (synthetic or organic) in very specific, targeted and mindful ways. These terms are useful in that they may identify a *school* of agricultural thought; a farm calling its culture “eco-agriculture” may follow in the tradition of William Albrecht understanding of agro-economies,<sup>7</sup> while a farm calling its practice “biodynamic” would fall under the lineage of the great mystic Rudolph Steiner. This is very useful information to the initiated, but is opaque and confusing to most of us.

Throughout this thesis I have chosen the *via media* in using the term *sustainable agriculture*. An agriculture is sustainable when it is in proper balance with the true nature of things, with God and the creation. Sustainability is gauged by the nature and complexity of relationships that are engaged while farming, and is characterized by harvesting only the abundance of the land, not mining natural capital that we call fertility.

The culture of the land and the species in production is only one element of sustainability. All farms are immersed in infinitely complex webs of relationships;

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<sup>6</sup> For a wonderful demonstration of the difference between “industrial” organics and “sustainable” organics, see Michael Pollan’s powerful book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006.).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.acresusa.com/other/ecoag.htm](http://www.acresusa.com/other/ecoag.htm). AcresUSA is a publisher of books and a self-titled periodical that advocates and communicates an agriculture based on the works of pioneers such as Albrecht and Julius Hensel.





sustainable farming is practiced by attending to as many of the existent relationships as are humanly possible. This includes not only the complex of relationships in soil, water, cropping and husbandry systems, and resident non-engineered ecosystems, but also relationships between those who labor on the land, with those who own the farms, the neighbors of the farm (human and otherwise; next door, down the river and down wind), the supply chain in and out of the farm system, and with the six –year- old learning that broccoli is not such a bad thing, perhaps because she cut it herself with her Mom when they picked up their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) share on Tuesday. By instituting an agri-culture while considering, or attempting to consider the web of relationship in which every farm is immersed, sustainability will be achieved. This is tantamount to discerning the presence of God in Christ in the world and on the farm, and in doing this, we are far less likely to participate in the desolating sacrilege that typifies the majority of conventional, and all industrial agri-cultures.

May our labor with these pages and in all we do sustain us and our world to the glory of God.



## Chapter 1

### As It Was In the Beginning

two days' rain wakes the green in the pastures  
crows agree and hawks shriek with naked voices  
on all sides the dark oak woods leap up and shine  
the long stony meadow is plowed at last and lies  
all day bare  
I consider life after life as treasures  
oh it is the autumn light

that brings everything back in one hand  
the light again of beginnings  
the amber appearing as amber

-W.S.Merwin<sup>1</sup>

When I think of New England's ecological landscape, it is the transition zones, the margins that call to me. The small fields, small forests, small rivers, jagged coastline and small, often culturally distinct cities, towns and villages do not provide an economy of scale grand enough to impress. There never were millions of bison traversing seas of prairie grasses here, but I love standing in the middle of a hay field in early summer before the first cutting. We have about twenty acres of land in hay and alfalfa at Emery

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<sup>1</sup> From "September Plowing" in W. S. Merwin, *Flower & Meadow: Poems 1977 – 1983* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1997), 33.





House. My favorite is an oblong field on the north side of the property, down the hill from our house, that stretches out to bluffs over the Merrimac River, sheltered from the winds by a hundred yards of forest. A dozen or so species of grasses, legumes and broad leaf plants occur in this mature hay field, and seeing the wind ripple across the face of the field opens wild and free places within my soul. Maybe it is that I stand taller than the hay. Maybe it is that I can grasp on some level what is happening in a system like this. I certainly know how to harvest a sizable portion of the biomass of hayed acreage with some efficiency. Perhaps I feel some dominion of the plot. I feel much the same about the forests here. There is not a great diversity of trees. It seems somehow manageable. I can handle a chainsaw so it is harvestable and even useful to me.

When I move to the margin between field and forest, however, something different is happening. The full height of the trees towers above me. Woody shrubs look me in the eye and brambles scratch at my thighs. The relative uniformity at the center of the field gives way to dozens of other plants that either can not take the competition from the domesticated species or their human benefactors, or love the coolness of partial shade or maybe thrive in poor sandy soil that our colonial forbearers also discovered three hundred years ago and stopped plowing in that direction. Poison ivy abounds, and vinca (Periwinkle) mats spread into the forest. Wendell Berry sings the praises of hedgerows, writing, “(they) are marginal areas, little thorough faires of wilderness closely crisscrossing the farmland and in them agriculture is constantly renewing itself.”<sup>2</sup> So are we.

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 148.



Red tailed hawks and bald eagles, now common on the Merrimac River can be seen perched high aloft on the forest edges. The hawks watch the fields for rodents and snakes and the eagles hunt fish and ducks in the river, and occasionally our turkeys in the old apple orchard. Song birds gather not in the forest but at the edge where air is dry and berry and seed producing plants also thrive. Deer walk more comfortably on the margins than when grazing the alfalfa, timothy or clover at the center. I, standing there, am aware that I am but a piece of a much larger puzzle. I have no role here but to push back the inevitable creep of the forest towards the open space and its portion of the sun. I cannot understand this system as well as the field. It's use to me is not as clearly apparent. In my tool-box of control mechanisms for this portion of the ecosystem I find only a chain saw and a bush hog (though many have a sprayer full of Round-Up in there as well). The only apparent power I have in this place is destructive and that is not edifying, so I, as many of us do, retreat to the center of the field.

The mosaic of ecosystems in New England is made up of countless micro-systems nestled one up against another, or many others in small areas. This is the magic of New England, for the micro-ecosystems clustered together form a massive surface area of margins. As a cloud of coal dust becomes explosive and clay particles multiply the nutrient holding potential of soil beyond their mass, small entities provide great surface area. Relationship occurs where objects (or systems) meet. In relationship, energy is transferred, information is communicated, gifts are exchanged and love happens, sometimes, when the density of relationship become great, it becomes explosive. The greater the surface area, the more potential there is for meeting; the more chance there is





for relationship. It is here, in the chaotic, imprecise margins that relationship, that is life, happens most blatantly. Existence occurs only in relationship, and life itself is perhaps best conceived of as simply a self-perpetuating cycle of infinitely complex relationships. For the person with an imagination open to God, life itself is simply participation in the love and life of God.

Everything is murky. The solid ground we want under our feet constantly shifts. Nothing is as static as it seems, but this here is our starting point on the path to understanding God through how we survive and how we survive in terms of God, for though our ability to grasp the metaphysical reality in which we swim is minute, our survival as a cultural species is dependent on our ability to make meaning of it, and in the end, make food out of it generation after generation. This is the path towards a theology of sustainable agriculture.

## **The Great Commandment**

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:37-40; Mk 12:28-32; Lk 10:25-37; Jn 13:31-35) This is the great commandment, the summation of the Law of Moses as revealed by Jesus Christ. This is a summation of not simply the Mosaic Law like Christ tells us, but with an ever-evolving human understanding of our surroundings, as we will see in the course of this thesis, we can understand it to be a summation of Natural Law, of the Law of Thermodynamics and the Law of Conservation of Mass, for this proclamation is a summation the Law of the True





Nature of Things. It is a blueprint for the practice of life in which we are told by God to love all that *is* in every conceivable way of being. Love, though, is an opaque word.

The love proscribed in the Great Commandment is to be understood in terms of *agape*. *Agape*, one of three Greek words that translates into English as “love” (the others being *philos*, dear or friendly love and *eros*, erotic or romantic love), implies a vast, open, emotional, affective, juicy, tasty relationship. It is all encompassing, whole, organic. Most of us with hearts open to God can imagine loving or even attempt to love God in an *agapic* way, but this is only the first half of the Great Commandment.

We are commanded to *agape* with our neighbor, as well. This engulfing love places us in a simultaneously outward, inward and all around facing posture that knows no boundaries and knows no limits. This is perhaps the only actual occasion that we, finite human beings have to do something with infinite consequences. Another way of understanding it is that we are called to love life itself.

In following the command to love life itself as *agape* insinuates, our beings have no choice but to be thrown open and encounter our neighbor as those with which we inhabit time and space. The expression *agape* in its organic totality cannot possibly be contained. Where “neighbor” usually connotes a fellow human being, usually a human being in close proximity and with whom we have familiarity with, the category of “neighbor” in terms of the *agape* of the Great Commandment expands infinitely beyond the interpersonal, inter-human real. *Neighborhood* rather than neighbor is more in keeping with an ecological frame of consciousness, as the term neighborhood accounts for a much broader complex of relationship. To live into the fullness of the Law as



taught by Jesus, we are to express *agape* in all forms of relationship; between human and non-human subjects, sentient and non-sentient, organic and inorganic, systemic and individual, historical and imagined, Holy and as-of-yet-not-seen-as-Holy. It is a call to live in boundless generosity, expecting nothing but *agape* in return, but preparing us to respond to the failure of the world to love us as we love it with nothing less than more of this great love. The Mystery and miracle of Christ is this teaching and the ability to heed it, both of which we receive by grace alone. But, our fractured, sinful selves and our fractured and sinful societies clutter our beings and shroud our perception of the eternally actual presence of God in the world, of love this wild, and of our ability participate in it.<sup>3</sup>

Our world is fractured. It is broken and suffering, and it is also gorgeous, airy, delicious, with puppies rolling in the grass and babies laughing at new faces. The incredible variety of natural experience, not to mention the paradoxical and seemingly comfortable coexistence of tremendous good and horrendous evil is for many of us too confusing, chaotic and dissonant and to be comfortable with, or even seem possible to reconcile. However, what we take to be confusion, chaos, and dissonance is actually just the distortion that results when we believe or attempt to act as a static being in the perpetually undulating universe that we inhabit. This is the cosmologically grounded imperative of the Christian life, and it is all predicated on accepting the overarching condition of the world: Mystery. This is the True Nature of Things.

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<sup>3</sup> This concept of “eternally actual” is taken from Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. and his classic of sacramental theology *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963). Sacramental theology will be taken up in detail in the following chapter.





From the beginning of human history Mystery has been recognized, incorporated into our creation narrative, and variously worshiped, denied and confused. In the evolution of the Abrahamic faiths, Mystery began to be encountered and described more in terms of chaos or abyss, where unfathomability became such a dire condition that the history of the world was shifted to combat it. The fruits of the growing fear of chaos are faithlessness, dis-compassion, entangling attachments, and boundless violence against our selves, and our human and non-human neighbors, and this fear comes to fruition in our strides towards control of self, women, society and the natural world, and our attempts to domesticate God. So deep are these habits of perception that, at least in the post-Enlightenment West, have become an *a priori* experience of the world. We cannot encounter, and we certainly cannot express *agape* towards the true nature of things when we fear them; but if we are to follow the command of God, we must. The survival of humanity and the multivalent community with which we are absolutely interdependent depends on it.

## **Creation Revisited**

What is the nature of the world? Well, we should begin with the beginning, for the foundation of our understanding of the world is located in the mythological memory of our founding, and in the Western world, that mythological memory is located squarely in the Book of Genesis.

“In the beginning the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a mighty wind swept over the face of the waters.” (Gen 1:1-3)



The Earth was dark, watery, mysterious. The words “formless” and “void” are not positive superlatives, rather they offer the connotation of wild, unknown and most certainly chaotic. The deep, or the abyss is home to the shadowy beast Leviathan (Job 3:8, Job 41; Ps 74, 104; Is 27:1), an unknown, uncontrollable, and generally sinister, lurking force. The watery image, caressed by the might wind of God, also opens the imagination to archetypes of woman. We are invited to imagine the darkness and wetness of the womb with its flowing and mysterious (in terms of womanly fertility) nature. The myth of the primordial pre-creation has a latently hostile, dark, chaotic beginning.

On that first day as the mighty wind crossed the deep, God illuminated the world, pushing the darkness aside, at least some of the time, segregating it into a Night. On the second day, God continued, saying:

“Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” (Gen 1:6)

The first day narrative tells us that the nature of pre-creation is a chaotic, dark mess, that God subjects to the brilliance of Light, and the second day, with the institution of the *dome in the midst of the waters*, God constructs a mechanical shelter for the pallet of the coming creation from the chaos. This construction is the meta-narrative of the subjection of primordial chaos to a violent domestication by men. From this minor, rarely considered line in Genesis, the spiritual inheritors of this tradition have found reason and cause to wage a millennium’s long war against the forces of chaos, mystery and the unknown, leaving in its wake a broken civilization, suffering people and a



devastated earth. Understanding the source of this myth is critical to understanding its impact.

The Genesis narrative is a hybrid of several ancient traditions that were consolidated and combined by the scribes of Israel in the midst of the Babylonian exile (c. 450 BCE). Genesis 1-2:4, identified with the Yahwist tradition (from the author's use of the term "YHWH" for God), is the earliest Biblical account of creation and contains direct parallels to what would have been the dominate Babylonian culture's mythology. The Babylonian creation narrative, the *Enuma Elish*, provides the seed material for the Yahwist's cosmological foundation, and the cosmological implications of this source material is startling. Below is an abstract of the *Enuma Elish*:

All existence, the entire universe, was encompassed in the body of the primordial goddess Tiamat. The universe was vast, formless, watery and definitively feminine. Tiamat had a consort, Apsu, and there was a pantheon of younger, lesser gods and goddess. One day, Apsu was awoken from his nap by the carrying on of the younger Gods. He confronted them for their insolence, and a conflict erupted, leaving Apsu dead. Tiamat, enraged at her consort's death, came down upon the younger gods and goddess and entered mortal combat with the storm god, Marduke. Marduke kills the primordial Goddess Tiamat, and raising his sword, cleaves her in two. He opens up her body like a clam shell, pulling the two halves apart making a pocket in which the known world would exist.<sup>4</sup>

Two items leap out of this story. First, it was a young storm god who affected this creation of the heavens and the earth. YHWH, the God revealed to Moses on the mountain, was a storm god such as this. Pillars of flames, clouds, bushes burning but not being consumed; this is a primitive God arising from the ashes (or body) of an earlier

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<sup>4</sup> For a full translation of the *Enuma Elish*, see E.A. Speiser's translation of the original "Enuma Elish," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* ed. James B. Prichard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).





understanding of divinity. Zeus, another storm god, ascended to the head of the Greek pantheon in much the same manner in the very same historical period. But that is small potatoes.

The heavens and the earth are created in the space formed by the dead body of the Goddess. The creation occurs within the violently cleaved open body of the primordial creatrix goddess, and this creation is protected from *her* by this dome that separates *This* from *That*. *This* is light, dry, orderly, explained, understandable, evolved, differentiated and masculine. *That* is dark, watery, chaotic, mysterious, primal, undifferentiated and feminine. This myth is a glimpse of a pre-historical understanding of reality. It is a reality defined by blurry borders, by ebbs and flows, by mysterious forces beyond reasonable conception, and by dark, watery, creative femininity. The myth of the dome is a fragment of an old way of knowing that was violently defeated in the drumbeat of developing civilization.

The irony of the origin of our creation story is inescapable. We got it wrong. Chaos is original, prior to *order*. Order, human understanding through atomizing the world into graspable categories is a technique in a narrative form to make sense of the true nature of things. The fragmentary record of civilization defeating the older ways of knowing is preserved in the cosmology upon which Abrahamic faiths, and of particular interest to this inquiry, Christianity and Western culture are founded. The consequences of assimilating this mythical seed stock into our foundational cosmological narrative is staggering.



The acceptance as *a priori* that chaos is the enemy is the primary cosmological deficiency in the Scriptural record, and, as we will see below, is the foundational cause of Christianity's perpetual dis-ease with the created world. The nature of the world is not a world where chaos is subdued; chaos is not subdueable. More basically, however, chaos is not something we should feel a need or desire to subdue, and in fact we must not attempt even to resist it. To be in alignment with the true nature of things, with God in God's self, the mystery of chaos must be embraced as a central revealing fact of the glory of God. Order, in some meta- sense of the word, as instituted in the creation myth of Genesis 1-2:4, is the normative understanding of divinity. This understanding is the legacy of the cosmological myth we have inherited. However, for most of us, in our daily lives, in our experience of divinity, and in scientific inquiry of the highest kind, chaos, or at least mystery, is more indicative of the true nature of reality than a vision of the world defined by a synthetic order sheltered by a constructed dome in the heavens.

The narrative of God the Dome-Maker has led the Christian tradition to identify our God as God the Law-Giver, Rule-Maker, Line-drawer, Structure-definer, Separator and Other-maker. Our story tells us that the mystery and chaos of the primordial universe was corralled off (or we were corralled in) by God.

The nature of things, though, when taken in cosmologically, on the margins of physically knowable reality and spiritually knowable reality, reveals the true nature of things, God, not as Law-Giver, but Wonderful Counselor; not as Rule-Maker, but Mighty God; not as Structure-Definer or Other-Maker but Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Is 9:6) The laws and rules we can attribute to this God come in the forms listed above, the





Law of Thermodynamics, the Law of Conservation of Mass, in the arc of the moral universe that is long and bends always towards justice,<sup>5</sup> and inscribed on the fleshy tablets of our hearts. These are natural laws, or to avoid the polemical nature of that term, organic laws. One flows into another, separation does not exist. The unity of the cosmos, of God, of all the creation, of what you spent last Tuesday morning doing seamlessly intertwine and the sum of those parts is what is. As William Temple, the great Archbishop of Canterbury wrote, “God immanent is a principle or energy of adjustment and therefore variation; God transcendent is the eternally self-identical – the ‘I AM’.”<sup>6</sup>

## **A Hole in the Dome of the Heavens**

It is hard to eat while running a marathon or talk on the phone while moving a hay field; there is so much movement, things happen too fast. It is not easy reading or writing on a rocking boat. But sitting here at this keyboard writing, why do I think there is some stillness occurring? Each moment that passes is one moment less I will experience in this form (as a man). Each moment that passes is the passing of another opportunity to

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<sup>5</sup> Often attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr., this image can be traced to one of the fathers of the Unitarian church, Theodore Parker, from a sermon entitled “Justice and the Conscience”. For King’s more famous usage, see: Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, “Where Do we Go From Here: Address to the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, Atlanta, GA August 16, 1967” Stanford University, [http://mlkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/where\\_do\\_we\\_go\\_from\\_here/](http://mlkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/where_do_we_go_from_here/) (accessed February 19, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1951), 295.



consciously achieve (or more accurately become aware of) complete union with God.<sup>7</sup>

Besides, I am far from still. The house is swaying imperceptibly with the wind, the tectonic plate I sit upon is moving ever Westward as our planet careens around the sun in the outer arm of a galaxy spinning rapidly in probably some larger formation of galaxies and clusters of galaxies and probably larger units around goodness knows what. At the atomic level, *I* am mostly space, being made up of differentiated packets called atoms best conceived as a cloud of electrons rapidly moving around an infinitesimal core. 99.999...% of *me* is the space between these bits of matter moving at terrific speed. Everything is always moving. Nothing is static, ever. Absolute zero, the temperature at which atomic movement “freezes”, is only theoretical. Even beyond the perpetual motion of everything, we find the definable lines of being further blurred by the constant manifestation, evolution and decay of physical things. Is this a vision of chaos? Ought we fear it, or be it?

The physical phenomenon occurring are destabilizing to an orderly interpretation of reality in of themselves, but the history of science teaches us that the primary destabilizing factor is a matter of epistemology. How do we even begin to know of the nature of the world?<sup>8</sup> When we think of light, it can be grasped as both a particle and a

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<sup>7</sup> We “are not far from the Kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:34) That our utter union with God was never fractured, that the Kingdom of God has always been at hand but for our noticing it, as reflected in Heidegger’s writing, will be the subject of a following chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Here an interreligious lens would be extremely useful to conceptualize the relationship between knowing about the physical world and the manifestation of the physical. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, or conditioned genesis (*paticcasamuppāda*) describes a chain of cause and effect in twelve parts that leads from ignorance, through identity to physical manifestation and unto death. I am not aware of a good Buddhist-Christian dialogue regarding dependent origination and Christian epistemology, but this would be a worthwhile inquiry. “A comprehensive Discourse on *Patichcasamuppāda*” by the prominent Burmese Theravada monk Mahasi Sayadaw is a classic on this doctrine. ([http://www.mahasi.org.mm/e\\_pdf/E17pdf.PDF](http://www.mahasi.org.mm/e_pdf/E17pdf.PDF))





wave. It behaves at times like a particle and at times as a wave. The deciding factor is the *observer*. It is probably folly to learn quantum physics from a theologian, but Leonardo Boff is convincing in his metaphoric description of quantum realities. To keep from further muddling the concept, I will quote Boff at length describing the epistemological conundrum of reality.

At bottom what exists primarily is an undetermined number of probabilities of beings – quantum physics call these *wave packets* – each with its own speed, its position, and its trajectory. At the moment when it is observed, there is a *wave function collapse*; in other words, only one particle, the observed one, is materialized and comes into existence. All other possibilities go into collapse and disappear, returning to the quantum vacuum.<sup>9</sup>

That light is either a wave or a particle depending on the observer. Truly the very existence of the wave/particle may be dependent on the observation process, the critical lesson being that an even greater folly than learning physics from a theologian is to expect an immutable character to the ground of reality. God self announces “I Am That I Am”. God in God’s self is narrative and ontology, story and being.<sup>10</sup> The foundational reality we observe is not even a both/and reality, it is a many/probably reality. This is the chaos that our Genesis narrative fenced off behind the dome as pre-Creation, not of God. This does not seem to be a truthful cosmological foundation. But alas, we need not abandon hope, for there is a second covenant that offers a correction to this error.

The chaotic pre-story of Genesis pervades the biblical account of the Hebrew scriptures. And the word *chaos* that I use above intentionally straddles constructive and destructive connotations of the word. Perhaps chaos as a concept itself needs to be

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<sup>9</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 59.

<sup>10</sup> John Milbank *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 430.





reinterpreted and the word liberated from its hegemonic connotation. John Milbank, in his classic *Theology and Social Theory* writes, “The infinite is not chaos (in our traditional understanding), but a harmonic peace which is yet beyond the circumscribing power of any total reasoning.”<sup>11</sup> Maybe that thing, that watery, feminine, mysterious chaos that Marduke *cum* YHWH is said to have walled off is not some swirling, confusing mess of being. Maybe it is swirling and confusing, but it needs to be reframed as not being a mess. It is just right. It is the way it really is. This hermeneutical lens brought to bear on Genesis 1-2:4 is the Christian corrective to a faulty cosmology. Perhaps what was walled off in Genesis was the true nature of God.

The Dome opens only twice in the biblical record. First, in the Hebrew bible, “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth and the windows of the heavens opened.” (Gen 7:11) This is the start of the flood. That which exists outside of the created order, the primordial chaos, when unleashed, destroys the world as human civilization understands it. This is a Genesis 1-2:4 cosmology.

The second time the heavens are opened is in the first narrative of Christ in the earliest of the Gospels, Mark. Jesus, an adult appears at the Jordan seeking baptism at the hand of John. “And just as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” (Mk 1:10) The baptism of Christ, the commissioning of his ministry is revealed as the tearing apart of the dome, the unleashing of the true nature of things in history, the heralding of God’s real presence with us.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>12</sup> This vision of the hole in the heavens was inspired by Gordon Lathrop in his book *Holy Ground*, (Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).) though



The spirit descending like a dove through the hole in the dome reveals that the unknown, the mystery that undergirds, envelops, encases, pervades existence is not a hostile thing. It is not a thing to be walled out. It is the nature of things. Even the image of a dove is enlivening. Watch a dove fly. They flitter and bob, and with the movement of their wings they emit an odd sound somewhere between a coo and a flutter. They taste great and are numerous. They symbolize peace. They represent the Holy Spirit and the season of Epiphany. It is a multifaceted symbol and this is what first came through that hole. A dove is a fitting metaphor for the nature of God in a specific time and place.

Milbank's reading of chaos as "harmonic peace which is yet beyond the circumscribing power of any total reasoning" gets to the heart of our foundational Christian doctrine, the complicated Trinitarian formula of God. Three distinct Persons of one Substance. Our God is a God of relationship, God is relationship; and relationship requires difference, or at least differentiation. Differentiation between subjects in relationship is the harmonic resonance of communality (if not community). This central abiding factor is the foundation of our Christian understanding of the nature of reality.

The Church, the Body of Christ of which all Christians are members is founded and exists under that hole in the heavens torn open as Christ was commissioned in His earthly ministry.<sup>13</sup> This is the critical cosmological revelation of the Incarnation. The old story that chaos surrounds us, held at bay by a savage God is ripped asunder. "The world is not what you think it is, is not what you were told," is what the Evangelist Mark is

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Lathrop does not consider the implication of the Genesis chaos narrative as a cosmological issue in his formulation of a hole in the heavens liturgical theology.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.





telling us in this story. God is in fact that overwhelming mystery that the culture's stories tried to suppress for their own convenience and gain. And, that overwhelming mystery, in its dark, chaotic, watery and un-understandable self, is the base creative energy of existence. Furthermore, it loves you. It loves everything. It is something not to fear, not to hide from, not to deny, but to abide in, to embrace, to adore.

The Incarnation is prolonged eternally in God's perpetual sending of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, energy, the movement of matter that courses down from the primordial chaos to a world to long hiding from the True Nature of Things.<sup>14</sup> This sending occurs everywhere at all times, the hole being just a allegory that the Dome does not exist, never did exist, but was just a hegemonic tool of domination seeking to domesticate the wild and watery nature of being.

Our broken cosmological foundation is the result of our primordial fear and misunderstanding of existent chaos that has lead to untold extremes of psychic and physical violence. But all is not lost. Being small, finite human beings, we must make bite sized efforts to orient ourselves on God. We need to practice orienting ourselves on the true nature of things, reordering our understanding of the true nature of things as not being an abyssal, foreboding darkness, but as a somewhat disconcerting, and also loving and organic Mystery.

Practicing living under the tear in the heaven needs to start somewhere. Gordon Lathrop says, this "broken cosmology is liberated when it is practiced as 'broken

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<sup>14</sup> Schillebeeckx, 25.



symbols.’”<sup>15</sup> Now, let us come down from the clouds (or climb out of the philosophical ditch) and return to the fields, for the practice of sustainable agriculture is a “broken symbol” capable of healing a sin-sick body, mind and soul.

## **Beginning to Practice a New Cosmology**

At the center of the Emery House property, on eastern slope of a large hill stands a beautiful old farm house built in 1745 (the third structure built on this location, the first one begun in the 1640s). Looking north towards the river are twelve acres of alfalfa, bordered to the east by five acres of hay. Just south of that is a six acre meadow that we are beginning to manage as grazing pasture. Our turkeys make their way around the meadow and, God willing, larger livestock will once again graze there. At the far east end of the meadow are the hermitages where guests and interns live.

Keep heading south into the tree line past two massive copper beeches and you walk through thirty odd acres of woodland, including our little stand of sugar maples we began tapping last year. Up on top of the hill, above the old farmhouse are more two hermitages, the barn, farmyard and vegetable field. Across an overgrown rock wall to the south is a ten acre field of corn with another hayfield on the hill just to the west. Down the west side of the hill, below the two hermitages are forty more acres of forest, twenty of which are covered in Japanese Barberry. Hrummph. All in all it is about 100 acres, thirty of which are cultivated.<sup>16</sup>

It is hard to follow a narrative description of a parcel of land. It is hard to imagine

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<sup>15</sup> Lathrop, 68.

<sup>16</sup> See map in the appendix.



what the landscape looks like, let alone feels, smells, or sounds like from reading a map. Soil surveys, watershed studies, taking of a wildlife census, walks on the land with an eye for what the deer or turkey are up to each offer a slice of the totality of what is happening here, but that totality will ever be beyond the grasp of our conscious understanding. We must approach an ecosystem in full knowledge of the infinite nature of the system, like a fractal, with each order of magnitude we focus in on revealing another order of magnitude smaller, forever. A thousand lifetimes could be dedicated to understanding the complex of relationships existent on this hundred acres, or in the 3000 square feet under the canopy of the catalpa tree in front of the house, or in one row of spinach in the field or in a single tablespoon of fertile soil. How many lifetimes have been dedicated already to understanding the inner workings of cells, molecules or atoms?

Recognizing the vastness of the relational complex we inhabit is the beginning of the practice of living into the true nature of things. We come to recognize our existence within the web of creation only through feeling the *relative* presence of others, otherwise we would again be positing a static point in reality. This recognition invites us naturally into a state of solidarity, which is defined concisely in the Principle of Solidarity contained within the “Rural Ethic of Agriculture, Food and Community” of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. This principle states:

The principle of solidarity motivates us to care for the earth and the greater bio-community in which we ourselves are just a part. Solidarity in this sense means a stewardship of the land as we recognize that creation is a web of life in which we all cling together. What does not fall into the web of life? What is not a part of creation? We confess that all things are a part of creation, and solidarity extends this to say that





all people and all living things are part of one community, the community of Christ - the new creation we seek in our modern lives.<sup>17</sup>

Solidarity is an active, participatory condition, engendering affection, compassion and fealty. If, as a species, we generally felt solidarity with our fellow created entities, we would forge more harmonious, constructive, mutually beneficial relationships. These are characteristics of sustainable, generative systems. However, we are called, and by grace alone have the capacity as a species to be in relationships that surpass the goodness of solidarity. The fulfillment of the Great Commandment in a world engulfed in the chaotic Mystery of God comes in *agape*, forming boundlessly integrated relationship with the totality of the Creation. This is the catholic (universal) love that the catholic (universal) church is commissioned to spread in the world. It is also descriptive of the starting point a truly sustainable agriculture.

Attempting to think, let alone act, in catholic terms, is on its surface folly. In many ways, it mirrors the challenges of the adage “Think Globally, Act Locally.” Wendell Berry writes persuasively about the impossibility of “thinking globally,” and even attempting to do so is the first step down a slippery slope of detachment from the only true reality which is present in the here and now.<sup>18</sup> Far too often the specificity of location when speaking in theological terms is lost or abstracted. We speak of social location, cultural location, class location, ecological location and our location in the arc of history, but rarely in reference to our latitude and longitude. To begin to love the

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<sup>17</sup> “Principle 7: Solidarity” from “A Catholic Rural Ethic for agriculture, food and community.” National Catholic Rural Life Conference, [www.ncrlc.com/ruraletic.html](http://www.ncrlc.com/ruraletic.html) (accessed December 12, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Wendell Berry often critiques the notion of Think Global, Act Local. Typical of his thought are the following essays: Wendell Berry, “Conserving Communities,” *Resurgence Magazine* 198 (May 1995); Wendell Berry, “Watershed and Commonwealth” in *Citizenship Papers* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2003), 137-41.



world as we are commanded by God we need to pay a lot less attention to our attitude and a lot more to our altitude. The here we must always hold as most important is specifically the where you are in any given moment. The *agapic* love of God and neighbor finds its genesis in the practice of *agapic* love right here, right now.

When planning our planting for a season, from deciding on the cultivars to remembering that tomatoes should never follow broccoli (or is it the opposite?) and what was grown where from last year to how tall will the Brussels' sprouts be before it is time to harvest the spinach in the row north, we get confused and frustrated. We have two hundred or so varieties growing on about an acre of steadily improving land. Everything needs different amounts of water, has different nutrient requirements, attracts different pests and is at risk from different funguses, bacterium and viruses. Different plants come to maturity at different times, and inevitably, the weather or the business of life or plain forgetfulness gets me to sow radishes, lettuces, tomatoes and nasturtium in a way that never in the course of a season will all be ready at the same time to have that salad I dreamt about all winter. It is confusing, even chaotic, and if I had contracts to provide  $x$  amount of spinach at a certain time to a buyer that has a purchasing schedule dictated by a chain of supermarkets, making planting decisions based on the varieties of life in a field can quickly give way to planting schedules and growing cultures based on economics of finance and commerce and not the economics of home and ecosystem.

With the right mix of chemicals and the right light bulbs, you can grow tomatoes in your bathtub. This culture takes pesky variables like soils fertility and weather right out of the picture and your profit margins are much more predictable. If you are a buyer for





Archer-Daniel-Midland you buy grain by the freight train load, and because the mills to whom you sell the grain cannot handle much variation, that grain has to be consistent from the first freight car to the last, thousands of tons of uniform agricultural produce. Growers must produce uniformly predictable crops because the mills at Frito-Lay need it that way.

The logic of production that stems from a system like this, leading with the values of uniformity and predictability in the name of efficiency and therefore profits, is just that, a logic of production. The purpose and value of the entire agriculture is in no way concerned with any form of relationship that is not controllable (or perceived to be controllable) by human beings. Mystery, the unknowable, unaffected exemplified in the hegemonic imagination as variability, unpredictability, diversity and lack of uniformity becomes chaos, the archenemy efficiency, nemesis of the bottom line. We must ask, “How long will your perceived order last? How long is can you keep Mystery at bay?”

The practice of the here and now is living, learning, working and being right where you are. That is the practice of sustainable agriculture. The 10,000 acre grain farm when it is supplying ADM does not have the opportunity to test the old Chinese adage that the best fertilizer is the farmer’s footprints, for no one has time to walk that much land with an eye to see much of anything important. Thinking in these terms, though, of linear conceptions of time, place, growing patterns of specific plants, relationships between a crop and the market into which it will flow, and the plentitude of details a working relationship with the land conjures, pulls us out of alignment with our desire to



live in *agapic* relationship with God and neighbor. We cannot ignore the concrete details but we must not idolize them as the only existent reality if we are to love as we know we are to love.

The infinite nature of *agape* demands we encounter the world in equally infinite ways. This is the catholic posture, a universal posture. We are called to form a catholic conception of agriculture, that is an agriculture in alignment with the true nature of things, an agriculture practiced in full knowledge of Mystery. In a catholic approach we are not led away from the here and now as we are in the thinking globally binary, for the universal has nothing to do with the temporal reality but rather with the true nature of things, with God. Like Thomas Merton writes, “But oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!”<sup>19</sup> An *agapic* approach necessitates an organic approach, that is an approach placing the wholeness of a system, a wholeness greater than the constituent details or parts. Our approach is relational, for as we began to understand above, existence itself occurs in the web of relationship immersed in a sea of Mystery.

One of the prophets of a relational agriculture conscious of mystery was anthroposophic pioneer Rudolf Steiner. Steiner, most widely known as the foundational thinker of Waldorf education, offered a series of lectures in Silesia (a region of eastern Poland, in places straddling the German and Czech borders) in 1924.<sup>20</sup> These lectures have come to be known as the “Agricultural Course,” and outline a rather esoteric vision of agricultural systems. He comments on the spiritual nature of certain minerals, the

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harvest Books, 1999), 459.

<sup>20</sup> Rudolf Steiner *Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture* (Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, Inc. 1993) 27-33.





influence of cosmic forces on living systems, and the flow of energy in such systems, then offers tools and techniques to better understand and harness (or work in concert with) these energies.<sup>21</sup>

The Steiner vision of agriculture, now known as *biodynamics*, is helpful in our understanding of how to practice an *agapic* agriculture because one of its central tenants is that agriculture occurs, and certainly is sustainable only when it is practiced in terms of relationship. This concept finds it home in the concept of “individuality,” a term with broad use in anthroposophism, but applied very specifically to agricultures systems and extremely useful for us to understand farming as we are called to.

All farms, all agricultural systems, according to Steiner, must be related to as an “individuality,” that is as an individual, unique, recognizable, and potentially self-sufficient organism. It is a loving thing, the constituent parts such as the soils, organic compounds, living beings, water, and sunlight interacting similarly to the organs in your own body; each filling different functions but depending upon the other systems proper functioning to survive. This is reminiscent of the Gaia theory of the Earth as an organism put forth by James Lovelock in his seminal *Gaia: A New Look at Life*, published in 1971.<sup>22</sup>

An agriculture recognizing the inherent organic/systemic nature of agriculture, and recognizing the absoluteness of specific places in considering agricultural systems, invites us into a web of relationship in the here and now that is not only compatible with

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<sup>21</sup> Biodynamics shares with other anthroposophic systems a foundation of highly esoteric Christian dogma reminiscent of the Gnostic heresies in the early church, with much of the knowledge reserved for the initiated.

<sup>22</sup> James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).





our call to *agape*, but reinforces this call and guides our practice. We may understand in our heads the systemic nature of the human body, mind or being, but moving from relating to humans, or women, or those people down the street to participating in the life of a friend, child or spouse, the experience is categorically shifted. The same magnitude of change in relationship occurs when a farm is approached not as a cropping system, a profit (or loss) center, or a job, but as a living thing, a fellow member of the creation, and a thing that depends on us and we on it. Living with an agriculture such as this, characterized by infinitely complex webs of relationship requiring us to consciously participate in relationships without a full or even reasonable knowledge of what is actually happening is a very concrete practice of living in the full knowledge of the Mystery of God. This is how we are called to live.

The concept of a farm as an individuality has very specific implications for Biodynamic practitioners, which I am not, though I am intrigued. While I do not understand the many of the workings of the biodynamic practice nor of what occurs within systems subjected to biodynamic practices, I am convinced that biodynamics creates the relational systems it sets out to create and that those relationships are healthy, stable and enviable. Someday, perhaps, we will move towards a biodynamic culture, but it takes baby-steps to make it to the Kingdom.

There is an old planting system indigenous to the Americas called the Three Sisters that gives us a rough sketch of the relational nature of conscientious, sustainable farming that concepts like the individuality of a farm lead to. In the Three Sisters system, squash, corn and pole beans are planted together in a way that complexifies relationships between



the species birthing a graceful and balanced sub-system in the field. The squash spreads along the ground shading out weeds, the corn grows above this canopy and its elongated leaves allow ample sun to penetrate to the squash while the beans wind their ways up the corn stalk, its own leaves fitting between the corn's, and in the roots of the bean special nodules exist that make excess nutrients available, helping to feed the squash and the corn.<sup>23</sup> It is a beautiful system. Corn is a heavy nitrogen feeder that is helped by the beans and needs protection from weed competition which it gets from the squash. The beans need poles to climb and probably appreciate some of the wind protection afforded by the corn. Squash can be sensitive to too much heat, so the shade provided by the corn and beans is helpful. Who would not love this system?

In the near term, this classic polyculture is not as efficient as separate monocultures of each crop. The planting becomes more complicated, as they are best planted at different times. Fertility management is complicated, as fertility requirements for each of these crops is different, and pesticide use is also significantly more complicated as each class of plant hosts completely different pests. Further, this culture cannot be mechanically harvested, as each crop is harvested in very different ways at very different times. Perhaps most importantly for the commercial farmer, the per acre yield of any single crop, squash, corn or bean, will be reduced. The lack of conventionally defined

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<sup>23</sup> This process is called nitrogen fixing. Legumes (the fabacea family of plants including beans, peas, clover and alfalfa) exist in a symbiotic relationship with bacteria called *rhizobia*. The *rhizobia* inhabit structures in the legume's roots (rhizomes) where a fascinating economy exists. Through photosynthesis, the plant constructs sugars, and in this case, the legume constructs more sugar than it needs for itself, so it exudes them through the roots into the soil and the rhizomes. The *rhizobia* need this sugar, and are blessed with the ability to strip an ion off of atmospheric nitrogen, fixing it, making it chemically possible for the legume to use. It is such an abundant system that there is excess fixed nitrogen left in the soil system as well as stored in the tissue of the legume.





efficiencies of this system make its commercial application unlikely.

This is not to say, though, that this is not a model of agriculture that is too be emulated if not outright practiced. In the long-term, the complex relationships formed in this culture do indeed reflect the values that the Great Commandment orients us upon. Fertility requirements will begin to be balanced, as no single crop's mineral requirements will strip the soil bare because no single crop reaches a density to do so. Fertility is further balanced with the nitrogen fixing capabilities of the bean plants. Herbicide use will rapidly decline, for not only is application of herbicides difficult in polycultures, but the habit of the squash will eventually shade out competing weeds. There is additionally a reduced risk of crop loss due to the greater diversity of the field. An episode of a squash blight or a late frost that kills an early corn planting is as devastating to a diversified farmer as it would be to a squash farmer in a bad year for squash or a corn farmer in a bad year for corn. A plague of corn borers may decimate your corn, but your squash and beans will pay the bills or get your family through the winter. Corn can handle a drought better than pumpkins and beans can handle extended wetness better than squash. The risk of nature is dispersed for the farmer in polycultures by the very nature of diversity. Lastly, in a complex polyculture system such as this, while the total tonnage per acre of each individual crop is less than in a monoculture systems, the aggregate tonnage of the whole system will be higher.<sup>24</sup> When we farm conscious of the quality and quantity of relationships we encounter and create, the land smiles and offers us an abundance with which we survive. This is sustainability at its essence and the invitation

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<sup>24</sup> Matt Liebman "Polyculture Cropping Systems" in *Agroecology: The Science of Sustainable Agriculture*, ed. Miguel A. Altieri (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 206-8.



is at hand, has always been at hand, so why is it we keep missing it?

It is in moments like this that the literature of sustainable agriculture falters. The roots of why our species' ability to rightly relate to the Earth and the infinitely complex systems thereon has decayed are found in our civilization's basic understanding of the nature of reality. As we saw above, this understanding is rooted in our mythical memory, in our case in Genesis. Genesis was written with the most advanced cosmological understanding of the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. The cosmological foundation of our approach to existence must reflect the cosmological understanding our civilization has as of the beginning of the second millennium CE. This understanding, when envisioned through the lens of Christian faith and practice, reveals a radically orthodox approach to reality where the last will be first, the meek will inherit the earth, and the Kingdom of God is at in fact at hand. A functioning cosmology in this context reveals the truth and possibility of loving God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind and all our strength and our neighbor as our self. A cosmological consciousness such as this invites us to the possibility of a relationship with the infinite, the possibility of *agape*, helping us, as Evelyn Underhill writes, "look away from the transitory and created to the Abiding and Incarnate."<sup>25</sup> In this, we learn that a sustainable agriculture is not only possible, but that it might be what Lathrop writes of as the practice of a "broken symbol" that itself can liberate us from a broken cosmology.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Lathrop, in writing of "broken symbols" is speaking very specifically about liturgical practices. Portions of this chapter originate in a paper on approaching agricultural practice as a liturgical practice. My larger point, as we shall see specifically in chapter 2, is that agriculture is a practice of encountering God on, if not above, the order of traditional liturgical approaches to God usually confined to parochial settings.





Thomas Berry's prophetic voice resounds heartily at this point. In his seminal *The Dream of the Earth*, Berry turns our collective attention to metaphysics, the basic governing principles of the universe. The universal principles he identifies are the unifying and guiding aspects of the evolutionary process that began with the advent of being in the Big bang and continue to the typing of this word. Our culturally conditioned consciousnesses have shrouded the truth of these principles that had once been intuited in our primitive ancestors (hence the mythological understanding of the Goddess that "cultural advances" cleaved in two). These universal governing principles are:

1. Differentiation
2. Subjectivity
3. Communion<sup>27</sup>

Differentiation is the most basic expression of the universe. From the first instants of the Big bang process, energy and matter (if this is even a useful binary) differentiated, became distinct categories of existence. Actual, individual units of existence, packets of  $x$  identifiably separate from others is a basic conceptualization of the nature of things. An atom is identifiable as an atom even among other atoms. This allows the possibility of subject-subject, subject-object relationship. I-Thou cannot occur without differentiation.

Subjectivity refers to the interior quality of the differentiated units. Berry writes, "From the shaping of the hydrogen atom to the formation of the human brain, interior psychic unity has increased along with a greater complexification of being."<sup>28</sup> Systems,

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Berry, 43-46, 106-7. He sometimes substitutes the word "values" for principles. This is an expansive complexification of the idea I am putting forth here that I will not go into further at this time.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 45.





structures, qualities interiorly evolve into ever more complex units. The more an individual evolves, in say their relationship with a spouse, the more complex, integrated and interrelated they become.

Communion is the principle that recognizes the inherent interrelationship of every reality with every other reality. Much like the evolutionary trend towards more complex subjectivity, communality also evolves into more complex forms. The relationship I have with my daughter is truly more complex than the relationship our two Border Collies have with each other, which is more complex than the shovel's relationship to the barn in which it hangs, though there is a cosmically significant relationship occurring there.

But communion in the universal governing principle sense goes beyond evolving complexity and interdependence to enliven the understanding that everything is intimately present to everything else and nothing is completely itself without everything else.<sup>29</sup> This pulls us back to our primal awareness of a universe that is a "single, if multiform, energy event."<sup>30</sup> Berry offers powerful example of communion consciousness when he offers that gravity, that basic force that controls the vast expanses of space, is not a categorically different force from affective attraction amongst people.<sup>31</sup> The sexual desire one feels towards their partner is a real and total experience of gravity, just a different flavor of it.

Differentiation, Subjectivity and Communion. This is a way of knowing that is worth living by. Berry's principles are a lens through which we may begin to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 45-46.



differentiate between Abiding and transitory, Incarnate and created, leading us to see that in the end all are actually one in the same. The grace and beauty of this understanding resonates with a world drenched in mystery. These universal principles are arms wide open, including, embracing, empowering, not excluding, denying or containing.

## **Onward to Sacrament**

Sustainable agriculture, agriculture practiced in concordance with the true nature of things only occurs with a degree of intention and with an openness to cosmological awareness. Truly sustainable agriculture occurs only in a posture of *agape*; full and complete love. Truly sustainable agriculture is a practice of *agape*, the practice of the full and complete love of all components of the agricultural ecosystem, seen and unseen. The *agapic* web includes the soils teeming with life, the air and rain, water underground and flowing by, the plants and animals that are chosen for their usefulness and the plants and animals that will come regardless of their desirability. The farmers, farm workers, neighbors, eaters of the food, sellers of the supplies and seeds, testers of the soil and everyone with whom these people interact. The butterfly effect of the mathematical chaos theory fame is palpably visible in a sustainable food system.<sup>32</sup> And in this, the seeds of the true nature of things are awakened in splendor. Seeing a sustainable agricultural system in operation, watching happy lambs in a fertile pasture, tasting a raspberry picked by your daughter 10 seconds ago, running a hoe through soil you have

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<sup>32</sup> See Edward Lorenz's address at the following website: American Association for the Advancement of Science, "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?: Address to the 139<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Washington, D.C., December 29, 1972" Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, [http://eapsweb.mit.edu/research/Lorenz/Butterfly\\_1972.pdf](http://eapsweb.mit.edu/research/Lorenz/Butterfly_1972.pdf) (accessed 19 February 2010).





watched blossom with fecundity over several years of care; are these not the seeds of supernatural life? This attention to life in its most visible processes are invitations to moments of becoming more completely yourself by and in and with everything else. This is a sacramental moment where the eternally actual presence of God is made manifest, definitively. An invitation to adore the incarnate world could not be more sweetly made.

In a posture of *agape*, the ancient rite of farming becomes a sacramental act. This is the subject of our next chapter, the sacramental nature of the world. Sustainably working with the soil, with plants, animals, microscopic forms of life, fungi, water and weather is possible only with love, the big love Christ calls us to, in our heart, on our tongue and perhaps most importantly in our hands and back. Loving, even adoring the land and the communities therein and the communities who feed on the abundance of the Creation is a sacramental love in that the act causes what it signifies.<sup>33</sup> We behold what we are, soil and air and water and plant and animal, and we receive what we are to become: Children of the Earth, children of God. *Gloria in excelsis!*

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<sup>33</sup>Schillebeeckx, 17.



## Chapter 2

### The Sacramental Universe

We grow accustomed to the Dark --  
When light is put away --  
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp  
To witness her Goodbye --

A Moment -- We uncertain step  
For newness of the night --  
Then -- fit our Vision to the Dark --  
And meet the Road -- erect --

And so of larger -- Darkness --  
Those Evenings of the Brain --  
When not a Moon disclose a sign --  
Or Star -- come out -- within --

The Bravest -- grope a little --  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead --  
But as they learn to see --

Either the Darkness alters --  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight --  
And Life steps almost straight.

-Emily Dickinson<sup>1</sup>

Wendell Berry opens his 1987 collection of essays *Home Economics* with a letter he had sent to his friend Wes Jackson, the visionary founder of the Land Institute. In it, he recalled a scholars commentary on the path of a raindrop traveling from the sky, into the canopy of a tree, channeled by leaves, twigs, branches and trunk, onto and into the ground and out of the system.<sup>2</sup> This scholar called the path of the raindrop “random.”

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1976), 200.

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 3-5.



By random, he seems to mean that the movement is not part of a pattern, or predictable order.

For the path of that raindrop to be accurately determined to be random (or for any situation/observation to be labeled as such), Berry observes that an unlimited amount of information would be needed for verification of randomness. It sometimes takes very little information to verify a pattern. For example, the Fibonacci sequence is visible nearly immediately (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8...). But to say that  $\pi$  consists of a random sequence of digits would require that we have observed the entire number, and this is not possible. Berry's conclusion is that "random" is not a verifiable condition, but rather is a description of a limit of perception.

Mystery, he says, is to "call the unknown by its right name... suggest(ing) that we had better respect the possibility of a larger, unseen pattern that can be destroyed or damaged and, with it, the smaller patterns." We must act, in all things, "on the basis of ignorance" founded on mystery. To posit a pattern where there is not one, or more dangerously, to deny the existence of pattern when one may exist is the core of a knowledge-based approach to all things, and in our case, to life and agriculture. Our ability to understand the workings of the world is limited, and Berry calls sustainable that agriculture that recognizes itself as grounded in ignorance "up against mystery," as opposed to conventional agriculture which understands itself as knowledge based and up





against randomness. Approaching Mystery as it were randomness leaves, he writes, necessary ruin in its wake.<sup>3</sup>

The first chapter laid out a very basic cosmological foundation, that chaos or Mystery is the overarching condition of reality. In that abstract understanding of reality we located an ontological vocation to live the Great Commandment; to love God and Neighbor as *agapically* as possible. If the terminal objective is right relationship with God, the enabling objective is right relationship with the creation. This is easy to understand, abstract concepts relating to fundamental truths (God loves you; life is suffering; et cetera) tend to be easy to understand and easy to believe at the arms length of abstraction. The challenge comes in applying an understanding of fundamental truths to the life you are living on any given Tuesday afternoon, or to the squash borers you encounter on your (hopefully) prize-winning giant pumpkin. Wendell Berry preaches an abstraction in finding mystery, not randomness in the path of a raindrop. Berry's prophetic genius reveals itself not so much here, but in consistently transcending the abstract-concrete barrier. In addressing the subject of eating, perhaps the most concrete occurrence a creature regularly experiences, he applies the infinite to the living of life when he writes, "We are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Radford Reuther condemns knowledge-based (post-enlightenment science) paradigms of understanding with harsher language, observing them as fitting the world to a "narrow spectrum fitted to dominate and control." See: Rosemary Radford Reuther in *Readings in Ecology and Ecofeminism*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyer (Kansas City, KS: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 92. The direct agricultural application of this narrow spectrum, knowledge-based paradigm is found in the catastrophe of Justus von Leibig's "Law of the Minimum" which stated that the growth of a plant is limited by the inorganic nutrient that was least available. As Nitrogen, Phosphorous and Potassium (NPK) was at the same time determined to be the only essential nutrients for plant growth, the use of synthetically derived NPK fertilizers exponentially increased beginning the decline of soil health throughout the world. See: Hugh Courtney, Introduction to *What is Biodynamics: A Way to Heal and Revitalize the Earth*, by Rudolf Steiner (Great Barrington, MA: Steiner Books, 2005), 3.



powers we cannot comprehend.”<sup>4</sup> No, Mr. Berry, we cannot comprehend them, but we are still going to go on eating. Turn back to Emily Dickinson’s poem at the front of this chapter. “But as they learn to see/Either the darkness alters/Or something in the sight/Adjusts itself to midnight/And life steps almost straight.” How do we learn to see the dark?

In this chapter, I offer a vision of adjusting ourselves to midnight through an understanding and practice of life and agriculture in terms of the Christian category of sacrament. A sacrament is not simply an event, a specific ceremonial or ritualistic moment, but is an occasion of an actual experience of the infinite, that is, a real experience of God. “The Sacraments”, are normatively construed as being contained within the Church. The Sacraments of the Church are absolutely a gift from God, they give us a ritual in which to practice such encounters. My assertion is that God has been more generous than that, not limiting the opportunity for actual encounters with God to the confines of an institution or tradition. In approaching the world with the intention, gravity, and frame of mind that the faithful approach the Sacraments, most importantly the Eucharist and Baptism, the real and present glory of God will be revealed in the creation and we will walk more lightly and be better citizens of the Earth. Folding back into the sacramental life of the Church, if our experience of the world reveals actual experiences of the Almighty, perhaps we will bring dirt under the finger nails living is a matter of life and death reality and sense of urgency into the life of the church. This is getting the Body of Christ certified 100% organic.

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<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating” in *Our Sustainable Table*, ed. Robert Clark (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 131.





Mystery is a darkness. A sacramental approach to life is one characterized by the practice of living in light of this darkness; living in the knowledge and love of this darkness, and in that, practicing seeing that it was not darkness to begin with. This approach does not attempt to alter the nature of mystery (to bring light to the darkness) but to adjust ourselves to its presence and hope that life might step almost straight, even into line with the True Nature of Things, God. This adjustment brings us to the core purpose of the entire theological project: the making of meaning. We make meaning not based on knowledge, as described above, not seeking causal relationships, nor justifications for human actions, but make meaning based on feelings, intuition, reason, an overriding appreciation of Grace and the humble posture Grace demands. We do this to understand God and the creation and not as a proof-text-like exercise which invariably puts our questions or motives ahead of the subject of inquiry. John Milbank writes that “Theology is a discourse of non-mastery.”<sup>5</sup> This it is, and this form of non-mastery is a grace filled path to making meaning in a world in crisis, in our own mundane lives, and in the systems upon which our civilization depends.

As I professed in chapter 1, all existence is relational, therefore, to make meaning with a toe-hold in reality, it must occur primarily in intentional relationship, that is, in community. In community we share our experiences and hear the experience of others. The hearing, remembering and telling of stories can be experienced as everything from anamnesis, the mystical remembering of the Eucharistic prayer or in catholic Collects, to Hannah Maeve’s weaving of Rapunsel, the 1960s boy/horse team Billy and

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<sup>5</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell 1990), 5.



Blaze, Brer Rabbit and a horse named Ping into a rolling observation of her two and a half year old world. These experiences, collected in stories shared amongst people collect meaning, gain momentum, and invariably, inspire celebration. We gather, talk, eat, enjoy, perhaps drink too much wine, are distracted by amorous urges, create music and relationships, and feel the presence of the good life for the good life, immersed in community's palpable web of relationships is life lived in the knowledge and love of that reality. Meaning is made in the light of this reflection of the true nature of things: the whole is an infinite reality and we, a participant, are quite finite. In making meaning we fill in the gaps between the infinite and eternal reality and our finite nature and resulting limitations to our perception of the infinite and eternal.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Meaning of Sacrament**

A most constructive tool that helps fill in the gaps and create harmonious and integrated meaning of our experience is found in the theory and practice of sacraments. As Berry noted in his letter to Wes Jackson, the whole realm of mystery has been left by modern humans in the realm of religion, home of the "experts" on mystery, who "take advantage our indifference by claiming to know a lot about it."<sup>7</sup> My hope is that the sacramental vision that follows offers a liberating inclusion of mystery into the lives of all of us and our neighbors. I do not intend a comprehensive formulation of sacramental theology, as this is far beyond my ability, availability and interest, but offer interpretation

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<sup>6</sup> See Marc Boucher-Colbert "Eating the Body of the Lord" in *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology*, ed. Albert J Lachance and John E Carroll (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 117. In this essay, I was directed to the very useful *Book of Sacramental Basics* by Tad Guzie, which also contributed to this line of thought. See Tad Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Berry, *Home Economics*, 4.





and reinterpretation of solid catholic sacramental sensibility and practice.

If you have ever felt the active allure of mystery, a sense of thinness of a place, season or time of day, a sense of accompaniment from a form of life incapable of conversation, an embrace from a landscape, a stilling flood of energy the flows from the rim of a cup offered to you on your knees, you have had an experience in the realm of sacrament.<sup>8</sup> The core of the sacramental theology that follows is drawn from engaging Edward Schillebeeckx, one of the twentieth century's most important sacramental scholars, in conversation with William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1940s, and Matthew Fox, a contemporary and radical Catholic theologian. The work of these three men synthesize into a sacramentology that demands our presence in the creation.

Schillebeeckx defines sacrament in many ways, but seems most concise in writing that a sacrament is any “vital human activity of which God is the object and the motive.”<sup>9</sup> A “vital human activity” is doing something that, if it were left undone, would bring grave consequences. God as “the object” means that the activity is concerned with that which is concerned with God,<sup>10</sup> which I understand as any activity somehow concerned with Mystery, the infinite, the eternal, and/or having to do with the building or maintenance of relationships. If we do anything that could be construed as vital, we can be sure that issues in the realm of Mystery, the infinite, eternal or anything having to do with life in an ontologically relational reality will be present. Lastly, in reading the word

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<sup>8</sup> Boucher-Colbert, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P. *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 16.

<sup>10</sup> It might be profitable here to delve into Karl Rahner's conception of God as our “ultimate concern.” See Karl Rahner, SJ, *Foundations of Christian Faith: New Edition* (Barcelona: Herder & Amp, 1982).





“motive” the key is intention. Our vital activity intersecting with an object concerned with God is only sacramental if we bring our intention to it. We might accidentally stumble across an actual encounter with God in the course of our lives, falling in love, conceiving a child, birthing a child or witnessing a birth, but this is theophany, not sacrament, unless in these activities we are seeking to encounter God concurrent to our search for a mate, an orgasm or a child. “Vital human activity of which God is the object and the motive,” this is our working definition, but it is hardly the end of the road.

Schillebeeckx further qualifies the sacramental as an activity that “causes what it signifies.” The author uses this phrase specifically to describe the sacramental nature of Christ’s activity in the world, all of which were a “sign and cause of Grace.”<sup>11</sup> It seems, though, with a broad horizon of the presence and activity of God in the creation, “to cause what it signifies” invites most categories of human activity to enter the realm of the sacramental. The application of a biodynamic preparation to a field is a sacramental act in that it signifies the farmer’s embrace of a system, a process and a vision of reality while accomplishing what it set out to do, that is to restore wholeness and health to the land through the movement of energy or spirits.<sup>12</sup> Through the act of the Epiclesis in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit imbues the bread and wine with the real presence of Christ, that is what the symbolism and intention is and that is the result in the heart and mind if not the mouth of the faithful.

Recalling the catechism, be it Roman, Lutheran or Anglican/Episcopalian (from

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<sup>11</sup> Schillebeeckx, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Biodynamics continue to be raised as an example that I am unable to adequately explain. Please refer to Hugh Courtney’s introduction to *What is Biodynamics* (cited above) for an excellent primer on the concept.



which I quote), sacraments are defined as “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.”<sup>13</sup> Sourced directly from Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*,<sup>14</sup> this is how most of us understand sacrament and is the divinely rich ground where “God as object and motive,” “causing what it signifies,” and our experience of life in time and place in a sea of mystery converge and open to us life in what William Temple called a sacramental universe. With an understanding of object and motive, cause and signify in mind, Temple’s statement that a sacrament is simply “an instance of a very definite and special relationship of spirit and matter” is not a trite truism, but is a truthful reflection of the nature of things and is an invitation to practice this encounter.<sup>15</sup> The realms of matter and spirit, “the seen and the unseen” we recall in the Nicene Creed, are not only both real and essential, it is in the convergence of these realms and only in the convergence of these realms that God, the true nature of things is revealed. And we have as Temple explains, the ability to make “spiritual utilization of a material object whereby a spiritual result is effected.”<sup>16</sup> This is the invitation to practice.

## The Cosmic Christ

Perhaps one of the greatest imaginations of modern time in the area of God’s

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<sup>13</sup> Revealingly, the only entries in the Episcopal Catechism pertaining to “Sacrament” are the above definition, a definition of Grace, and an acknowledgement of the Eucharist and Baptism and the great sacraments of the Gospels. See “An Outline of the Faith, commonly called the Catechism,” in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1986), 857.

<sup>14</sup> The first is taken from the condition of human nature which is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible. Now it belongs to Divine providence to provide for each one according as its condition requires. Divine wisdom, therefore, fittingly provides man with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments.” See: New Advent, “St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica III*, q. 61, a 2” ed. Kevin White, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4061.htm> (accessed 11 February 2010).

<sup>15</sup> William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: MacMillan, 1960), 491.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.





revelation is found in the person of Matthew Fox, who, since his suppression on grounds of heresy by the Holy See finds his home in The Episcopal Church. His imagination reveals what he calls a Cosmic Christ. Where Leonardo Boff identifies Christ as the pinnacle of evolution, the Cosmic Christ is revealed in the process of evolution.<sup>17</sup>

Previously I described the Trinity as a swirling cloud of relationship in which all is encompassed. The Cosmic Christ is the personhood that makes real, with the energy of the Holy Spirit, the coherence of the Godhead in the creation. This is the “cause what is signified” if you will of the Incarnation.<sup>18</sup>

Where a Cosmic Christ imagination serves our prayer-led work with the Earth exceedingly well is how Fox posits how, precisely, we witness the Cosmic Christ. The signature of the Cosmic Christ is seen, felt, and heard in the patterns, resonances, coherences and harmonies that present themselves throughout the creation. There is a hill at Emery House that demands sheep, they are supposed to there, and when it is someday populated with sheep that hill/pasture/sheep system will be a shining example of a resonating signature of the Cosmic Christ. What happens in your mouth and stomach upon eating a bowl of turkey soup made entirely of organisms that you personally have had a cradle to grave relationship is a harmonic signature of the Cosmic Christ. The prophetic witness of people such as Thomas Berry writing, “Nothing is completely itself without everything else,” is a coherent signature of the Cosmic Christ, as is a smile received from a baby, a sunrise across the Great Marsh of Rowley and Ipswich,

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<sup>17</sup> See chapter 7 of Leonardo Boff’s *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 131-44.



Massachusetts, the dawn crowing of Mr. McGregor our Speckled Sussex rooster, and the crackle and smell of a woodstove on a cold January morning.<sup>19</sup> The Cosmic Christ's signature is evident when things are as they should be, when they should be.

Adherents to the teachings of Rudolf Steiner might know what I am talking about. Trauger Groh, author of the seminal *Farms of Tomorrow*, exemplifies a biodynamic vision that corroborates Fox's Cosmic Christ. In commenting on the secret to producing good food, he offers that the best food comes from organisms that have the opportunity to fulfill their true given nature Groh writes, "In each creation there is a harmony of substance and forces that is typical and healthy."<sup>20</sup> This is reminiscent of Joel Salatin's comments on preserving the pigness of a pig and the Maryness of Mary mentioned in the Introduction.<sup>21</sup> The pigness, the Maryness, the harmony of substance and forces that is typical and healthy transcend the realm of Platonic forms and stand as signatures of the Cosmic Christ. A sacramental approach to the world, in our specific case, a sacramental approach to agriculture is an approach cognizant of, accepting of, desiring of, propagating of, cultivating of, harvesting of and broadcasting far and wide of this experience of the Cosmic Christ. Fox's organic vision of Christ is complimentary to the work of Temple and more importantly, Schillebeeckx.

The heart of Schillebeeckx's sacramentology, the metaphysical reality of the sacrament is the concept of "eternally actual."<sup>22</sup> This concept pulls us in two distinct directions, which I hope we shall see, will meld back together into a comprehensible

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 91.

<sup>20</sup> Trauger M. Groh and Steven S.H. McFadden, *Farms of Tomorrow: Community Supported Farms-Farm Supported Communities* (Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, 1990), 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> cf. 2, viii.

<sup>22</sup> Schillebeeckx, 60.





story of encountering God. “Eternally” lifts up the category of time, of when God is encountered, and it introduces the reality of the infinite. Eternal has no end, it is always. “Actual” speaks to the real, the solid, to place, to now. Eternally actual encapsulates everything.

Schillebeeckx arrives at eternally actual in his understanding of the Incarnation, God’s entrance in time and place in the person of Jesus Christ. He writes, “...the incarnation of God is the personal entry of the eternal into the boundaries of time.”<sup>23</sup> This is not earth-shattering theology and it certainly pulls up back into the stratosphere of abstraction, but then he brings the reader back to Earth, literally, in writing, “the incarnation is prolonged everlastingly in his uninterrupted sending of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>24</sup> God *actually* entered this world and *eternally* remains here.

This great Dominican theologian, whose human life ended only weeks before this chapter was written, provides a coherent structure that opens for us the possibility of participating in sacrament in two distinct (and absolutely inseparable) paradigms: time and space. For anything in the realm of sacramental theology to have any possible relevance to the practice of sustainable agriculture or even to simply being alive, the descriptions of the encounter with God must address not only the question of what the experience is, but when it is and where it occurs. This is the here and the now of it, and on the sea of Mystery on which float that is all that there really is.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 25.





## The Sacrament of the Present Moment

Many of us have heard notions of chronos and kairos batted around churches: temporal time and God's time. These are certainly fruitful concepts, but a binary of temporal and Godly time obfuscates the reality that we proclaim each Sunday morning in the singing of the Doxology. "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end."<sup>25</sup> This form of the *Gloria Patri* certainly speaks of the qualities and character of kairos, and it also reveals to us the sacramental opening in our very experience of time. Kairos is not over and above chronos, it is simply different, as spirit and matter are both real and essential, though different. As the presence of God can only be encountered eternally and actually where spirit and matter are witnessed in harmonic convergence, so the presence of God too is encountered in a sacramental way only at the harmonic convergence of chronos and kairos; the present moment.

"O, all you who thirst, learn that you have not far to go to find the fountain of living waters; it flows quite close to you in the present moment; therefore hasten to find it."<sup>26</sup>

Jean-Pierre de Caussaude, an eighteenth century French Jesuit, wrote an amazing spiritual treatise entitled *Abandonment to Divine Providence* in which the idea of the sacrament of the present moment was gifted to Christendom. He writes, "The events of every moment bear the impress of the will of God... It is right, therefore, to bless it, to treat it as a kind of sacrament."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> BCP, 406.

<sup>26</sup> de Caussaude, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 25.



The fundamental nature of the world, the true nature of things is described by de Caussaude in terms of the will of God. The will of God is the way things are supposed to be, eternal harmonious convergence, heavenly hosts singing Halleluiah. To the Divine will we are called to abandon ourselves, utterly, it being impossible to place too much confidence in the will of God. The soul that willingly and utterly seeks and follows that true nature of things will “sail with every wind. And every direction leads equally to the shore of infinity.”<sup>28</sup> He describes the Divine will as a deep abyss, and most importantly for our purposes, the present moment is the only entrance.

Those with even only slight knowledge of Buddhist meditation practices, in particular the *vipassana* practice of Theravada Buddhism, will be familiar with the idea of the present moment. I heard a story of a meditation master who when asked what time it is would show the face of his watch on which was written only the word, “Now.” “What time is it? – Now,” is in all truth the only true and acceptable answer. It is always simply now.

Life occurs actually and eternally only in the present moment. We live only now. What has passed is memory; what is to come is fully unknown. Nostalgia and fantasy are the two great poisons to the life of prayer. The past, the kingdom of nostalgia, is important, but God is not located there for the past is gone and God is not. Anamnesis, the Holy memory, was mentioned above, but it is not in the memory itself that God is encountered, but in the act of remembering in the present moment.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 24.





The future will never be reached; it is always at least an inch out of our grasp like the water shrinking from the lips of Tantalus. Christian hope is not about the future, there is no fantasy contained within. Hope, rightly practiced, is not longing for some as of yet unrealized future, but is an eschatological act of living right now in the assurance of and in relationship to eternity, hence Martin Luther's answer to the question, "What would you do if Jesus came back today?" was purportedly "Plant a tree."

Life truly does only occur right now, in this moment. An ecologically focused way of understanding this is that we live in solar time. Spirit and matter, chronos and kairos converge in the most spectacular of the harmonic signatures of the Cosmic Christ in the perpetual intersection of solar energy and the biosphere of planet Earth. Life to the scale it occurs on Earth would be unfathomable without the interaction of sunlight and photosynthesizing organisms. We are in awe of the sacramental confection of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of our Savior, as we ought to be, and with the same knee bending emotion should we approach that humble *arbor vitea*, or pansy, or sugar beet field we see from our bedroom window. From sunlight, these plants confect life itself. In an unpublished Master of Divinity thesis at Harvard, Giles Morris writes of sunlight and photosynthesis as an allegory for the Divine Light of God.<sup>29</sup> Sunlight happens only now, in this present moment.

Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry's partner in the correspondence above, writes beautifully about the now-ness of solar energy in *Becoming Native to this Place*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> J. Giles Morris, "The Light of the World: How to Read the Science of Photosynthesis as an Allegory for the Human Assimilation of Divine Light" (M.Div. thesis, Harvard Divinity School, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to this Place* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1994).



Jackson tells stories of his rural Rice County, Kansas home at the time of the first European visitors there in 1541 and in 1994 at the time of the books writing. In the former age, 25,000 people lived there, their sustenance carried in the bodies of the great bison herd powered by contemporary solar energy stored in the grasses of the vast prairie ecosystem. A mass of mammals concentrated this energy that was selectively harvested by the people living there, again concentrating that energy. But that was that. It was a closed, sustainable system all powered by the all powerful sun, and 25,000 humans were sustained and countless millions of bison and an ecosystem spanning the midsection of an entire continent was stable from the time of the last ice age's retreat to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Today, the picture is very different. Only 10,400 people are sustained by this same land and it is a mean existence. Yes, the produce of the land, the wheat, soy and corn travels around the world feeding people, but the place, the community (human and non-human) supports the survival of only 10,400 people and absolutely no bison. Why?

The sun, energy of the present moment, working with solar powered perennial grasses formed the base of the ecological economy of the 1500s. Grasses collect and store contemporary solar energy. They carry in their stalks and seed heads the amount of solar energy they collect in a single season. It is very fresh energy. A portion is pushed down into the root system, and each season they die back and the litter is processed by organisms into the soil storing this energy in modest but incredibly stable forms of fertility held in place by the whole organism of the a prairie ecosystem. It is noble, beautiful, wildly productive by way of biomass sustained, biodiversity supported, and





resilience of the system. It is a system occurring with the coherence and harmony of a sacrament, now, in the present moment. God was palpable in the system.

What powers Rice County now? The past. Dead energy. Ancient solar energy stored in the decomposed and pressure treated corpses of organisms dead for millions of years. Rice County is powered by petroleum. Petroleum powers the tractors and the combines, petroleum was used in the manufacture of those giant implements, as it was used to manufacture the synthetic fertilizers the culture of annual grasses such as corn and wheat demand since their plant community is unable to establish a stable base in the soil. That farmer sits not so much on a tractor but on a seventy gallon tank of ancient solar energy radically distilled and concentrated in the form of diesel fuel. How many acres worth of primordial jungle were needed to produce a barrel of crude oil? Squash them all down under the pressure of millions of years and millions of tons of rock and the sunlight that those plants and animals concentrated is made literally explosive with energy. But it is old energy, it has been captured and hoarded, and now released like a stampede on to the land, into the soil, up in the air and deep in the souls of human beings. Petroleum is the least present moment substance imaginable, the furthest from Now, the furthest from God, and systems founded upon its back (our agriculture and the rest of the global economy) are in mortal peril because of its very nature.

Thomas Berry observed that with industrialization, which unleashed widespread exploitation of dead solar energy, we transitioned from geologic to historic time as our impact on the earth has reached such proportions that we have a “planetary altering





capacity.”<sup>31</sup> I would say that the planet, and certainly humanity, was on geologic time until the Neolithic age and the advent of agriculture. With that transition, we entered the solar time, for human livelihood and civilization entered a structured, active relationship in an economy of sun, plants, animals and the multitude of other life forms that constitute an agricultural ecology. Kairos and chronos crossed paths palpably before our ancestors eyes for thousands of years. Life under the supremacy of coal, oil and gas dims our vision in pulling us constantly from the present moment with ancient, dead solar energy, and down a long spiraling drain of the promise of eternal growth and progress. “The divine action,” writes de Caussaude, “places before us at every moment things of infinite value.”<sup>32</sup> Isaiah tells us, “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.” (Is 42:14)<sup>33</sup> Life happens now, and only now, in the present moment. Life occurring is the presence of God. This is when we find God, but where is it that we find God?

## **A Sacramental Universe**

As Buddhist language opens the sacramental nature of the present moment to us, the idea of *here* is similarly opened in this language. As a divinity student I attended a retreat led by the great Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. He offered a walking meditation consisting of taking a step and trying to know with each step, “I have arrived.” Take a step, know that you are there and no where else. The old adage, “Wherever you go, there you are,” is as ontologically truthful as any of Thomas’ Pure Perfection Terms.

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<sup>31</sup> T. Berry, 103.

<sup>32</sup> de Caussaude, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “The Eucharist: Ecumenical and Ecological,” *Ecumenical Review* 44:1 (January 1992): 85.



William Temple called Christianity the most material of the great world religions, meaning that the world of matter matters deeply in Christian consciousness. This materialism is embraced in the Anglican form of Christianity as an incarnational theology, which concerns the holiness of the creation as evidenced by the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God would not have entered the world of time and matter in so conclusive a manner if that world was not important. The world either always has been Holy, necessitating Christ's saving presence to maintain this state, or by His incarnation the world was returned to a prior, now lost Holiness. The distinction is not important, that the world of time and matter is of concern to God is. In matter, as we saw in time above, the sacramental encounter with the divine is immanently available. This immanent availability characterizes what Temple calls a sacramental universe.<sup>34</sup>

With these entertaining sentences, Temple clarifies his understanding of a sacramental universe; "If He did not create He would still exist, for he is not dependent for existence on His creation. But if He did not create, He would not be what He is, for He is Creator." He follows, in a less fun but more typical Temple fashion, with:

"Thus the view of the universe which I have called sacramental asserts the supremacy and absolute freedom of God; the reality of the physical world, and its process of creation; the vital significance of the material and temporal world to the eternal Spirit; and the spiritual issue of the process in a fellowship of the finite and time-enduring spirits I the infinite and eternal spirit. Matter exists in full reality but at a secondary level. It is created by spirit – the Divine Spirit – to be the vehicle of spirit and the sphere of the spirit's self-realization in and through the activity of controlling it."<sup>35</sup>

This is what Thomas Aquinas was talking about above in writing that humans are "led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible." This is what the

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<sup>34</sup> Temple, 473-95.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 493.





catechism is telling us about the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. Temple understands that God is observable in “variances in an otherwise predictable natural order.” It is in variation, breaks from the predicted norm, which we get a glance at God, or more specifically, we are treated to a view of the personality of God.<sup>36</sup>

For Temple, personality is a principle of variation, a “principle of perpetual adjustment according to ‘sufficient reason.’” This brings us back to Chapter 1 and Temple’s connection between the immanent and transcendent God. He continues, “...God immanent is a principle or energy of adjustment and therefore variation; God transcendent is the eternally self-identical – the I AM.”<sup>37</sup> His project is to link *that* aspect, the eternal and infinite nature of God to the immanent aspect of God whom we experience all around us. This the variation of order, the personality of God expressed in the creation that Temple explains, these are the occasions to experience the signatures of the Cosmic Christ.

Temple assumes an immanent reason in the universe. He locates this immanent reason in the person of Jesus Christ, whom he refers to generally as the Logos. If this Logos is impersonal, it is simply a “principle of logical coherence”; Buddhism is an expression of an impersonal immanent reason. If it is personal, then God must be expressed not in “invariable uniformity, but in variability of adaptation as expressions of the constancy of divine character in the various moments of universal history.”<sup>38</sup> Sometimes, this personal God is visible more fully in particular circumstances, or to

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 294-95.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 302.



specific persons or communities, as evidenced by occasions of Virgin Birth, Resurrection, and God's presence in the Eucharist.<sup>39</sup> This notion of variability and the personality it implies, places the relationship of God to the Creation, between the eternal and the historical, in a realm beyond a simple cause and effect/ends and means binary relationship.

The world seems to operate under a principle of rational coherence, not constancy or invariability. It may be a variable and flexible system, patterns may or may not be observed or even observable, but it is still a coherent system. An example is that for many cosmological equations to balance, somewhere near 95% of the mass of the universe is chalked up to dark matter, an unknown, invisible mass, but without which the numbers don't work. This mathematic model proposes an understanding of the universe that is a rational system, and through the use of reason it is coherent, though the means to arrive at these conclusions involve a great deal of variation and imagination. In this, Temple locates the Divine personality in self-expression.<sup>40</sup> Temple sees the relationship between God and Creation as a sacramental relationship. All that *Is* (matter, energy, divinity), Temple envisions, comes forth from God, exists in time and space and folds back into the eternal. As we noted above, Sacraments necessitate material objects, so on a grand scale the universe is God's infinite Communion table that we participate in with every breath we draw.

It is in this realm where variation and mystery run parallel courses. Both are sourced beyond the observational powers of humankind. Both reflect a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 296-97.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 302.



incomprehensible, even joyful eventuality of human experience: that existence is not always predictable, and in fact unpredictable, even improbable occurrences is the stuff of life. It is squarely in the fact of the apparent randomness of variation that the wonder of God's Creation is made manifest. The mystery and chance of improbable outcomes are gifts of Grace, not frustrations in the laboratory or field of study. This is how Temple and Berry find the wonder of God (Mystery) manifest in the world. How improbable was the painting of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*? How unlikely was the human discovery of riverine grasses that could be cultivated and transformed into reliably life-giving bread? Or dogs as companions? Stephen Jay Gould wrote, "The pageant of evolution is a staggeringly improbable series of events, sensible enough in retrospect, but utter unpredictable and quite unrepeatable."<sup>41</sup> Temple opens this up even further in writing, "If the process of the cosmos produces beings capable of understanding and evaluating the cosmos, that tells us, as has been repeatedly urged, a great deal about the process itself."<sup>42</sup> Consider God the Christ coming into the world in the form of a little boy, born in a backwater province of the Roman Empire? How improbable? How unpredictable? (Isaiah, John the Baptist and the more astute prophets excepted).

We started this chapter with Wendell Berry and a conversation with randomness and now we have William Temple's revelation of the personality of God in variations of patterns. Perhaps another way approach the sacramental universe is in those vast categories of existence in which we have not been able to discern patterns or variations in

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Sallie McFague *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 43-45.

<sup>42</sup> Temple, 490.





patterns. Perhaps in them we will find ways to access God.

## **Behold What You Are and the Practice of Sacramental Living**

At certain times in the course of celebrating Mass, the Brothers of SSJE present the Eucharistic to the gathered congregation with the words, “Behold what you are. Become what you receive.” This is a paraphrase of Augustine’s words, “If you receive worthily, you are what you have received.”<sup>43</sup> This ritual action causes what it signifies. We are, in fact, what we eat. In the larger world, perhaps like Dickinson’s larger darkness, we begin to learn to see the true nature of things in the usually fleeting moments where creative result follows full intention. A winter spent with seed catalogues, a calculator, interested friends and a few bottles of wine which leads to late July’s first batch of salsa, that Pruden’s Purple tomato that needs no mayonnaise, the children at CSA pick up day smiling *and* knowing that Mom’s bag is full of vegetables; the harmonic resonance arrived at in that place is a sign of the presence of God, or God in Christ, or the Cosmic Christ, or use any word-larger-than-words to describe it. Those moments in those places are eternally actual encounters with God. Stand on the edge of a well cared for farm, look before you eat, “Behold what you are. Become what you receive.” It is a sacramental universe.

The practice of a sacramental life has much more do with practice than with words, but right now, in this place, words are all I have to offer. The words I have to offer are gratitude and kenosis, and with those words, the Kingdom of God is indeed at

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<sup>43</sup> Augustine, “Sermon 227” in *Saint Augustine: Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, in Volume 38 of *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959), 196.



hand. Gratitude and kenosis are the keys to the sacramental life, a true and reliable sign of that fact being that gratitude and kenosis are the foundations upon which a sustainable agriculture arises.

Gratitude is a broad theological category that I distill down to two components: understanding what has been offered and appreciating what has been received. Pay attention. Do not fall asleep. Wake up. Test your soil and read the tests. Know the land, where the water goes, what the weeds are, how the bugs live, why the deer keep coming or stay away, how chickens think and the best way to fry an egg. Out of ignorance, I used to suppose that biodynamics seemed to work largely because it provided a ritual structure that enforced paying careful attention to celestial and biologic cycles. If that was all that that farming system provided, a ritual structure, I would still believe it to be worthwhile. That it seems much more than that makes it exponentially so. We must understand the world we walk through if we are to care for it well or even to appreciate somewhat fully the gift we have been given. That old Chinese proverb mentioned in the Introduction sums it up neatly, “The best fertilizer is a farmer’s footprints.” With a practice of paying attention, constantly learning, watching, aligning with the pace of life which follows the pace of the sun, we will begin to appreciate what has been gracefully offered to us.

Consider the potato. A potato is magical thing, a truth hidden from those of us who have never had the opportunity to appreciate its entirety. A friend of mine, a farmer, says that he keeps growing potatoes because they make him feel like a real farmer. Oh yes they do. Where we live, potatoes go in the ground in late April or early May. We dig





a trench, drop whole or golf-ball sized chunks of potato every six inches and bury. As the vines emerge, mound the soil around them until a hill ten to twelve inches above ground level is built up then wait until the flowers die off. Without machinery, this is back-breaking work which undoubtedly adds to the magic.

Appreciation unto gratitude of the potato comes to fruition at harvest time. After cutting the vines back and loosening the soil with a fork, you get on your knees and plunge your hands right into the hill, into the earth itself. You feel it, it is firm and substantial and pulling it out, you know why the French call it *pomme de terre*, apple of the earth. You can live nearly indefinitely by only eating potatoes just like the one in your hand. It completes any meal made of only farm grown produce. They keep in the root cellar all winter. Everyone loves receiving them as gifts. They sell well at the farm stand, thrill CSA members and as in all things on a farm, the excitement of children digging potatoes makes everything else you did that day worth it. A potato understood in this fashion and eaten roasted with a pinch of salt and some olive oil is an invitation (if not a demand) for gratitude for the gift of the soil, the bounty of the Earth, the inclusion in a community that could accomplish a potato, and the eternally actual presence of God evidenced in the coherent resonance and harmony of the entire life cycle of such a humble tuber. God blesses potatoes and blesses us with them and we must have glad and grateful hearts. If you are not convinced about the sacramental encounter I describe in a potato field, you should hear Windy talk about tomatoes.

Gratitude opens us to the wonder of creation in knowing and appreciating what is offered to us, and kenosis, self-emptying, makes room for God. First raised in the second



chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, kenosis is a process of self-emptying, self-giving, and self-limiting that mirrors what I understand Jean-Pierre de Caussaude to mean by abandonment.<sup>44</sup> Putting ourselves aside, not the loving, relational, engaged child of God that we each are, but the grasping, angry, impatient person that we act like; this is kenosis. Doing what we are supposed to do or need to do, which does not always align with what we want to do or even are able to do, this is kenosis.

Simone Weil said something to the effect of, "It is not so much that we have to say yes to God, it is that we have to stop saying no." Filled with gratitude, we stop saying no to the true nature of things by realizing and practicing that it is not about us. Martin Luther plants a tree on the last day. Wendell Berry commends us to, "Plant Sequoias./Say that your main crop is the forest/that you did not plant,/that you will not live to harvest."<sup>45</sup> We strive for a balanced, stable soil ecosystem that regenerates its own fertility at the pace of the sun and share that food in a way that is not value-added organic but is honest, wholesome food that feeds a community and supports a fair livelihood for the farmer. That is kenosis, that is not saying no to God, that is placing us in a posture where eternally actual encounters with God can and will occur.

There is a final practice concerning living in a sacramental universe that I commend to the faithful and the open to faith; the Eucharist. The Eucharist is an end unto itself, an encounter with the living God in community in a form passed from generation to generation by the church from Jesus Christ to today. Participation in the

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<sup>44</sup> For an excellent opening of kenosis, particularly among Anglican theologians such as Charles Gore, see: John Macquarrie "Kenoticism Reconsidered" in *Theology*: 77 (1974):115-24.

<sup>45</sup> From "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" in Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems: 1957 – 1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 151.





Eucharist, though, creates an opportunity for practice that ripples into the world far and wide from the altar. The Eucharist is practice; the practice of encountering God. The ceremony and ritual, sensual experience of incense, bells and vestments, thousands of years of catholic tradition and generations of local convention, weight of authority of Holy Orders, and an individual lifetime of experience, thoughts and/or feelings about the Eucharist converge, with the result being as intense an instant of human communal intention and attention that most any of us will experience outside of our families. This ultra-focus lens of attention and intention makes it difficult to ignore the gravity and reality of the moment. This is the practice.

By immersing in the rite of the Eucharist regularly, we not only eternally and actually encounter God, but we also have the opportunity to attune our beings and our senses and cultivate habits to encounter God elsewhere, even everywhere. Eucharist is an end, and it is also a pedagogical tool of the highest order. As Evelyn Underhill writes, Many common things and acts of daily existence can be given such a sacramental quality, by Godward intention of those who are accustomed to seek and find the eternal in the temporal.”<sup>46</sup> Through repetition of this encounter with all of the aids of community and the blessed weight of attention, we can in this (and the other sacraments of the church) practice seeing God in all of the created world and in the face of our neighbors, no matter their species.

To the initiated, those already attracted or entranced by sacramental celebration in the church, holding the Eucharist as a pedagogical tool to seeing God elsewhere with the

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<sup>46</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 42.





same intention and attention can only enhance the experience of the rite, and it pulls one on the path to ceaseless prayer we are called to. To those to whom the church or a sacramental approach to the worship of God has not been introduced, has scared off, rejected, hurt or simply confused, take this as an invitation. I long held the idea of Eucharist (and most Christian tradition and theology) with suspicion or disdain, but an encounter at an altar presided over by a careful and wise priest changed something for me, if not in me. I came back and kept coming back, not understanding what was happening and certainly not knowing what to believe, but feeling as deeply as I had ever felt anything a broad peace, a moment of repose, a sudden stilling of my inner movements as I received the bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in a little circle of friends every Friday morning in the eastern most corner of Harvard's campus. My practice of encountering God in the world began there and it has been a very fruitful practice. Taste and see...

The dynamic unity of the practice of gratitude and the practice of kenosis is the first step down that sacramental path to the promised land.<sup>47</sup> The practice of encounter as practiced by the church in its sacramental life is an entry to this path. This is a sacramental universe in which God beckons us, every second, in every place with infinite treasures. In the following chapter I will introduce the idea of the path of least resistance as a model for the practice of sustainable agriculture. The practice of gratitude and kenosis puts us in a posture where that path of least resistance may hopefully become our only option as we eternally and actually encounter God in the dizzying array of coherent

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<sup>47</sup> Koyama, 83.



and harmonic resonance we are engulfed in. This is the first step on the road to not saying no God, and in each and every moment, life will step, almost straight.

There is nothing to eat,  
    Seek it where you will,  
        But the body of the Lord.  
The blessed plants  
    And the sea, yield it  
        To the imagination  
Intact. And by that force,  
    It becomes real,  
        Bitterly  
To the poor animals  
    Who suffer and die  
        That we may live.

- William Carlos Williams<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Excerpted from “The Host” by William Carlos Williams. William Carlos Williams *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume II 1939 – 1962* ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions Books, 1986), 260-61.





## Chapter 3

### On the Path of Least Resistance

You're about to be told one more time that you're America's most valuable natural resource. Have you seen what they do to valuable natural resources? Have you seen them strip mine? Have you seen a clear-cut in a forest? Have you seen a polluted river? Don't ever let them call you a valuable natural resource! They're gonna strip mine your soul! They're gonna clear-cut your best thoughts for the sake of profit, unless you learn to resist, cause the profit system follows the path of least resistance, and following the path of least resistance is what makes the river crooked! Hmph!

- Utah Phillips<sup>1</sup>

No, there is nothing special about me, but what I have glimpsed is vastly important.

- Masanoba Fukuoka<sup>2</sup>

The Lenten season this year has fallen very neatly into step with the flow of the Earth here at Emery House, or at least the flow of the sap. Yesterday, February 17, was Ash Wednesday, and with smudged black crosses on our foreheads, Windy, Hannah Maeve, Brigid, along with our interns Tara and Rick and I tapped eighteen maple trees and began collecting sap. This small number of tapped trees makes up only a tiny percentage of what is quite a substantial sugar bush. With the new brick evaporator we built and the stacks of windfall cordwood cut, split and stacked trees by volunteers at our biannual work weekends, we expect our thirty one taps to produce maybe ten gallons of

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<sup>1</sup> Utah Phillips, "Natural Resources" performed by Utah Phillips and Ani DiFranco, *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, m4a downloaded from iTunes, Righteous Babe Records, 1996.; and, Atsuhiko Lee, "Utah Phillips' Stories, Songs, and Poems," <http://www.jeddy.org/moi/utah.txt> (accessed October 22, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Masanoba Fukuoka, *One Straw Revolution: The Natural Way of Farming* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1978), 10.



syrup from the 400 gallons of sap we will collect and boil down. Our operation should hold out until the beginning of April, about forty days and forty nights from yesterday. Maybe we will kindle the last fire in the stove from the fire lit at one of the local churches in their Easter Vigil.

Sugaring season is wonderful mostly because maple syrup is so obviously a gift from God. First, there would be no reason for pancakes in the absence of the discovery of maple syrup. Second, there is a singular pleasantness to working in the winter forest under the right conditions: staying dry, not staying out too long, being able to keep gloves on most of the time, all conditions found in small sugaring operations. Then there is the sheer wonder of the presence of so much sugar in this one variety of tree. How stupendous a discovery that such abundance can be harvested year after year with no intervention, no worry, and when harvested within reason, no harm done to the tree. It is truly an abundance of sugar that as far as we can tell the tree does not miss. What a great use of the winter months for the farming class. Helen and Scott Nearing, authors of the inspirational book, *The Good Life*, satisfied the majority of their meager monetary requirements through a sugaring operation on their southern Vermont property.<sup>3</sup> And how symbiotic that a sugar operation could be harnessed to heat a greenhouse by integrating the evaporator into the structure. Sugaring is just what we are supposed to be doing this time of year.

In singing the praises of sugaring, I want to draw attention not to the sugar (as good as it is), nor to the sugar maple trees themselves, nor the sugarbush community of these

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<sup>3</sup> Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *The Good Life* (New York: Schocken, 1990).





beautiful trees, nor the forest that is composed of and supports this community, but to the whole piece of land here that makes up the world here, the organism or individuality called Emery House. Besides a few old red oak trees left by the original European settlers along some rock walls as shade for the cows, probably no trees here are more than 150 years old.<sup>4</sup> The European settlers cleared the forest for cropland and pasture, and harvested wood for building, firewood and charcoal. Some of the floorboards in the main house are twenty-four inches wide and run twenty or more feet long, a testimony to the ancientness of the trees in a forest that has stood here since the passing of the last ice age, some 10,000 years. But at some point, maybe 150 years ago, for reasons we do not know, some of the land here fell out of use for grazing or cropping and was left fallow. The results of this abandonment to providence sometime in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are heating the room I am writing in, are creaking in the wind outside, and are pumping out sap that will make Saturday's pancake breakfast with Windy, Hannah Maeve, and indirectly Brigid, the sweetest of the year.

This natural history and the process one witnesses over the course of even a single season offers one of the most critical cues about how to mindfully, carefully and sustainably work with this land here. This land wants to be a forest. If given its druthers and is simply left alone, the process starts immediately. Stretching out eastward from the main house is a six acre meadow that I began mowing my first summer here. It had been professionally cleared of two to three inch saplings perhaps fifteen years ago, but had

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<sup>4</sup> Red oaks can reach ages of 500 years, and the biggest ones are dying off. We do have one other tree that we can verify being 250 years, the majestic northern catalpa that towers over the southern half of the mail house. It is potentially the finest catalpa specimen in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.





been maintained only by an annual (or semi-annual) bush-hogging in Octobers. That first year, our little tractor with a deck-finish mower could barely chop through the heavy, woody weeds that were well established. Now, with mowings two or three times a year, the woody growth has died back, and grasses, wildflowers and a mix of clover and other meadow broad-leaf species dominate. If I stopped mowing for only a single season, the woody plants would be back by Autumn, followed the next spring by hardy, taller brush and the first signs of pioneer tree species such as quacking aspen and white birch. As they establish, the canopy trees will sprout and begin growing, eventually shading out the others. The forest as it stands now is in its age of beech, yellow birch, red oak, hemlock and of course, our wonderful sugar maples. If we stopped what we are doing on this land for 150 years, everything here would look like that. This land wants to be a forest, and when given the time it can (and will be) one again.<sup>5</sup>

In chapter one, we considered the true nature of things and the importance of a truthful cosmological story of the creation. In the second chapter, we explored how this cosmological foundation reveals to us the eternally actual presence of God and paths to recognizing and participating in our sacramental universe. Throughout, we have seen how the practice of agriculture is made more sustainable with the application of these theological lenses and principles, and how these visions are illustrated by the book of nature. The third chapter that follows is the final theoretical/theological exposition, and in

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<sup>5</sup> See the following address by Thoreau for an accounting of this process exactly 150 years ago: The Walden Woods Project, Henry David Thoreau, "The Succession of Forest Trees: An address to the Middlesex County Agricultural Society, Concord, MA 1860," The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, <http://www.walden.org/institute/thoreau/writings/essays/Succession.htm> (accessed 18 February, 2010). For the classic ecological text on succession, see Frederic Edward Clements, *Plant Succession: An Analysis Of The Development Of Vegetation* (1916), (New York: Kessinger Publishing, Llc, 2009).



it, I hope to offer a theological framework of a cosmologically grounded, sacramentally oriented approach to agriculture. This framework is centered on the precept that to live in right relationship with God and Neighbor, we must offer gratitude and undergo some process of kenosis. On and in the ground, this means learning what the true nature of things is and following its lead or cooperating as best as is humanly possible. It is knowing that the land wants to be a forest and working it out so that the land is happy and healthy (and stays that way) and you and your people get and stay happy and healthy, too.

### **The Path of Least Resistance**

At the front of this chapter is an excerpt of a spoken word performance by the great rabble-rousing folk singer Utah Phillips. In typical ironical language of Phillips, he says, “the profit system follows the path of least resistance, and following the path of least resistance is what makes the river crooked!” (He is *not* praising the profit system). In popular parlance the path of least resistance is the lazy person’s path, the easy way. Certainly this is how Phillips uses the term in reference to “the profit system.” This is the wide gate that Jesus warns us from when he says, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Mt 7:13-14)

Then, however, Utah Phillips flips the meaning and says, “following the path of least resistance is what makes the river run crooked.” It certainly is. The drops of water falling from sky through the tree and into the soil in the Berry/Jackson correspondence follow the path of least resistance, as does the wind flowing through the catalpa tree





outside of my window, and the Bald Eagles sailing on thermal drafts over the Merrimac River, as will baby Brigid as she learns to walk and will seem always ending up down hill. If a river runs crooked it does so for one reason: it is supposed to run crooked.

In the “Preface” to the radical agriculture classic *The One-Straw Revolution*, by the Japanese plant pathologist cum prophet Masanobu Fukuoka, Wendell Berry relates the book’s central theme of “natural” farming to Christ’s reminder, “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” (Mt 6:26) Berry writes, “The purpose in both instances, I take it, is to warn us of our proper place in the order of things; we did not make either the world or ourselves; we live by using life, not creating it.”<sup>6</sup>

Following a vision received as a young man, Masanobu Fukuoka left the world of agronomy for a simple hut on the side of a mountain at his family’s tangerine and grain farm. His vision was that humans know nothing at all, but the world around us contains all that is important to know. The lead of nature is all the leadership we need because life wants to happen. His conviction was simply, “crops grow themselves and should not have to be grown.”<sup>7</sup> With the new lease on life found in his little hut, Fukuoka’s father turned the maintenance of the fruit trees to his son.<sup>8</sup>

Tangerine trees, like all fruit trees, are subject to a wide array of problems: a myriad of insects, viruses, bacteria and fungi plague them. The collection of tired old apple trees below the main house here on Emery Lane is a testament to this fact. Fukuoka looked at

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<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry, preface to *The One-Straw Revolution*, x - xi

<sup>7</sup> Fukuoka, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4-10.



the vibrant health of the forests surrounding the orchard which had no tending and regarding his tangerine grove concluded, “To the extent that trees deviate from their natural form, pruning and insect extermination become necessary...”<sup>9</sup>

Fukouka’s trees for years had been pruned in the shape of a sake cup, as our apple trees are in the “classic tea cup” shape. This shape ensures good air circulation, access to sunlight and ease of harvest. Fukuoka put his new ideas to the test and let his father’s trees go feral. In no time at all, the branches that had long been managed and manipulated began to entangle, cutting off air and sun, creating premium insect habitat in the midst of stressed trees. The orchard withered and died as ours would at this point, too. Fukuoka learned that this was not natural farming but was abandonment.<sup>10</sup>

Abandonment is not the path of least resistance.

A river runs crooked because it is supposed to. Gravity, the qualities of water, and water’s relationship to the soil and rock it flows through and over reveals the path of least resistance with stark clarity. This calculus is compelling enough to have dug the Grand Canyon. Human beings can and do make rivers run plumb-line straight or up hill, but the river wants to run crooked just as the land here at Emery House wants to be a forest. It is the way it is supposed to be. It follows is the path of least resistance.

Harmonic resonance, moments of overwhelming beauty and grace, the places and processes in which we have a sacramental experience of God in the present moment right where you are: these are all indicators that you are on the path of least resistance. Most simply put, this path is the path that criss-crosses the trajectory of the true nature of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.



things. Calling it trajectory, or the arc of the moral universe is just another way of saying the will of God. In everything we do, from our most intimate relationships with other people, to decisions we make about our consumption patterns, to how we vote and how we farm, discerning the will of God and doing our best to make it done in the world is the primary task of Christians.

To become adept at living in a sacramental universe, I held up gratitude and kenosis as two primary practices in Chapter 2. Cultivating gratitude we learn what the gift is and learn to appreciate it and practicing kenosis we get ourselves out of the way of the way things are supposed to be. This is another way of describing the religious process of discernment, a topic of such depth and complexity as to require a lifetime of practice and writing to do justice to. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola* and the universe of practice the Society of Jesus has formed around its contents are a resource that the church and beyond should tap more deeply.<sup>11</sup> I cannot delve into the full exercises, but lift up a teaching from that tradition that is uniquely suited to discerning the will of God and path of least resistance in agricultural situations.

Imagine the will of God as water dripping from the tip of an icicle. Place what it is you are concerned with below this icicle and observe drops of water landing on it. Does it splash, as drops of water splash off of a hard surface like stone or brick, or is it absorbed, as if it landed on a patch of moss or a sponge? The will of God is often gentle, inviting, soft, or living, not harsh, sharp, jarring or jagged. When you can imagine that

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<sup>11</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, New Ed.* (Bristol, PA: Anthony Clarke Books, 1979).





the drop landing on your concern is like a drop of water soaking into moss you have yourself a good sign that the path of least resistance is being revealed.

Another tool for discerning the path of least resistance in agricultural settings is careful attention paid to how energy is expended in the system. If we are working with energy that is collected and released in solar time, that energy of the present moment that fueled the bison herds in Wes Jackson's Rice County five hundred years ago, we have found a good indicator that the path of least resistance is ahead of us. If it is dead energy, be it in the form of fossilized solar energy stored in petroleum or fossilized human labor stored concentrated in the form of capital, chances are we have strayed from that path.<sup>12</sup>

A final tool for discerning the path of least resistance is even more subjective than the previous two and it cuts to the organic heart of human integration in the natural systems of life and death. In the poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," Wendell Berry writes,

"So long as women do not go cheap  
for power, please women more than men.  
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
A woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
Of a woman near to giving birth?"<sup>13</sup>

The answer to these questions will be water falling on moss. The answer to these questions are in solar time. The answers to these questions will point us down the path of least resistance and to abundance as only a Creation illuminated by the light of Christ

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<sup>12</sup> Andre Gorz, *Ecology of Politics*, trans. by Patsy Vigderman and Jonathan Cloud (Boston: South End Press, 1980). Also see Thomas Berry's comments on the "...integration of the human within the ever-renewing cycles of the natural world as they are sustained by solar energy," in Thomas Berry, *The Dream of Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 104.

<sup>13</sup> Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems: 1957 – 1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 151.



could offer. What follows now is a vision of what the path of least resistance looks like on the farm on any given Tuesday.

## **Walking the One True Path**

The fruits of discernment are realized in agricultural terms in how we learn to make compromises and cooperate with the land, so that every dimension of the ecological community becomes healthier, happier and more itself every year. It is in this realm of compromise that a theological approach to agriculture distinguishes itself from the main body of eco-theology. Farming is a life and death endeavor. Human life is dependent upon the death of other organisms. Even the most observant Jain subsisting on food collected in manner that does not kill the food source (plucked fruit, leaves trimmed that do not kill the plant, and such) lives through death. Though human beings may choose to be vegetarian, plants, wild or cultivated, are distinctly not vegetarian (nor are chickens, so eggs sold a “from vegetarian chickens” are suspect). When cultivation comes into play, then the swath of death left by our systems of survival becomes staggering, a fact discerned in the early Buddhist tradition which lead to a reasonably clear prohibition on farming for monks, particularly when it comes to digging or plowing the earth.<sup>14</sup> A plough is bad enough, but a modern roto-tiller passing through soil is a genocidal calamity for the earthworm population. Countless millions of plants and animals were killed and displaced to make room for cropping systems. When we begin to consider the amount of life extinguished in the deep tillage practices and application of pesticides,

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<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka)* Vol. 1. Trans. by I. B. Horner (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2000), 13-14, 77, 253-58, 314-27. *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka)* Vol. 2. Trans. by I. B. Horner (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), 223. *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka)* Vol. 6. Trans. by I. B. Horner (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1993), 25, 57.





herbicides and fertilizer as it is in conventional, industrial agriculture systems, the sin upon sin of needless killing compounds itself. Sustainable agriculture is sustainable in that needless killing is reduced as much as humanly possible, but no matter how sacramentally it was grown, every plate of spinach ever eaten is covered in the blood of some form of life given that we may live. I would not go so far as to call an earthworm a martyr, but there on close inspection there is little categorical difference in their function and fate and the fate of martyrs of the church.

Being worthy of the lives given that we may live begins on the path of least resistance, and that path is realized in some of the basic principles of sustainable agriculture that humanity has discerned. The principles that follow are but a few of the countless structures available to us to help practice sustainable, sacramental agriculture, and were chosen for amplification in part for the level of importance I have found them to be in my own practice, but also in their translatability into a theological framework. (For example, the lesson, “Follow the directions found on the back of the bottle of pesticide,” is an important and consistently unheeded principle of sustainable agricultural, but it does not preach well). Four key principles of sustainable agriculture are:

1. Mimicking nature;
2. Seeking balance in all things;
3. Plant positive, not pest negative; and,
4. Harvest only the abundance.

These principles, tenets preached in some form in every book advocating sustainable agriculture follow along that same course that makes the river run crooked. In the near term, many of these principles may seem to point to a system that is less efficient and less



productive that conventional industrial agri-cultures, and seem to many to advocate a fantasy world of agrarian balance that might be “better,” but could never meet the food needs of the 7 billion humans on the planet. Each of these challenges will be addressed at the end of this chapter, but first let us review these principles.

### *Mimicking Nature*

Above we learned of Masanobu Fukuoka’s initial failure with his father’s tangerine trees. We read, “To the extent that trees deviate from their natural form, pruning and insect extermination become necessary...” He then continues, “to the extent that human society separates itself from a life close to nature, schooling becomes necessary. In nature, formal schooling has no function.”<sup>15</sup> The most perfect teacher for any would-be farmer is the ecological community with which she hopes to farm, for a healthy community indicates everything we need to know about everything in the system. Any healthy, preexisting community demonstrates balance and stability with little entering the system and little exiting. It is self-sufficient in that it regenerates its own fertility, processes its own waste, and freely and consistently reproduces. These are generally not conditions present on most farms. Below is a table comparing features of natural and cultivated systems in general:<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Fukuoka, 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> David Jacke, and Eric Tonesmeier, *Edible Forest Gardens: Vol. I: Ecological Vision* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2005), 28. This was adapted from the classic *Farming in Nature’s Image*, by Judith Piper and Jon Soule, two former students/colleagues of Wes Jackson’s at the Land Institute. Judith D. Piper, and Jon K. Soule, *Farming in Nature’s Image: An Ecological Approach to Agriculture* (Washington DC: Island Pr, Washington D. C., 1992), 122.



<u>Agriculture</u>		<u>Nature</u>
High	Fragility	Low
Low	Resilience	High
Low	Species & Genetic Diversity	High
Low	Degree of Functional interconnection	High
High	Rate of Nutrient Flux	Low
Fertilizers	Nutrient Source(s)	Local, recycled
Solar/Petroleum	Energy Source(s)	Solar
High	Amount of management required	Low/None
High	Waste/Pollution	Low/None
High	Amount of Food Produced	Low

The goal of an agriculture as professed by Fukuoka with his natural farming allowing trees, grains and vegetables to be themselves, Wes Jackson in his work towards perennial cereal crop systems mimicking the prairie, the permaculture movement with its elegant perennial growing patterns mimicking the forest, and biodynamics with its following of energy movements and the progress of the life of the farm as an individuality, is maintenance of, or creation and then maintenance of an agriculture that mimics nature in every way but the final row in the above table. This is where the compromise and cooperation on the part of the ecosystem comes in.

Edward H. Faulkner's revolutionary 1943 book, *plowman's folly*, describes the desolation of the worlds farmland through the use of the mouldboard plow, the iconic form that most of us would call "plough shaped," which began its ascent to agrarian hegemony with John Deere's 1837 introduction of a steel variant. This plough cuts





deeply into the soil, then through the curve of the horizontal plane, turns the soil 90°, leaving in effect long ribbons of soil lying parallel on their sides. In theory this buries the plant matter below the surface, facilitating rotting and freeing of nutrients. It does this, but the disruption of nearly every aspect of the physical structure of the soil and the biological community that lives there makes the released nutrients volatile and they leach or evaporate out too quickly. So begins the swing of the long arc of the fertilizer pendulum as farmers seek to return minerals to the soil that never should have left to begin with.

Faulkner advocates forgoing deep ploughing and allowing soils to remain as they are in their natural and undisturbed condition. To this end, he devises a culture (and the requisite machinery) to work with “trashy” soils (soils still covered with plant residue and cover crops). Faulkner understands that leaving soil pristine, mimicking natural conditions is completely intuitive. He writes:

It seems a bit humorous, too, to suggest a need for investigating whether men could grow healthy crops if they copied the soil conditions that prevail in nature where crops are universally healthy. It is a good deal like suggesting to the mother of a newborn baby to investigate feeding her child naturally rather than by bottle as is conventionally done. In neither case is experiment necessary. We already know – by incontrovertible example – that wherever man does not interfere crops grow spontaneously. It follows of necessity that if man duplicates in his farming the soil conditions which in nature produce such perfect results, he will be able to grow similarly perfect crops in cultivated land.<sup>17</sup>

Faulkner’s vision of an agriculture not reliant on the annual destruction of soil structures has gained ground in field crops such as corn, beans and grain, and in hay and

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<sup>17</sup> Edward H. Faulkner, *plowman’s folly* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1943), 12, in the Soil and Health Library, <http://soilandhealth.org/files/QOXVbvoylM/010105.ag.test.pdf>  
<http://www.soilandhealth.org/01aglibrary> (accessed 12 February 2010).



silage production. This culture is called “no-till,” and machinery is continually developed and improved to work in these conditions. Those of us in the world of vegetable culture are generally left to improvisation and hand work to follow Faulkner’s wisdom. Here at Emery House, a mould board plough has not touched the soil in anyone’s memory.<sup>18</sup>

A sub-category of mimicking nature is revealed in the horticultural truism “Right plant; Right place.” Besides mimicking nature in soil management, cultivation practices and fertility inputs, mimicking as best as possible the types of life that exist locally or are suited to the specific conditions present on a given farm is also critical.

We should not grow ginger at Emery House, though with hot enough greenhouses and with enough lighting control we surely could. Less non-intuitively, growing tomatoes, or any crop that requires the use of a greenhouse treads into the realm of unsustainability. Greenhouses are required for some crops to grow in temperate climates because the frost-free season is not long enough to support a plant from seeding to harvest. The range of plants capable of reaching maturity before frost is accomplished by extending by starting the plants in an artificially warm climate some weeks or months before they can safely be transplanted outside. This culture, though, requires a massive output of energy for heat and other material resources: plastic sheeting and metal frames

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<sup>18</sup> In transforming a hay field into vegetable production some use of a sub-soiler was made to facilitate incorporation of the sod, a process with which Windy and I are intimately familiar. A sub-soiler does disrupt soil structure but does not invert the upper layer. With the sod well rotted and incorporated we plan to only use a disk harrow and drag harrow to work residue into the top few inches, and will use a rototiller a little as possible. Weed pressure is relieved through aggressive hand cultivation (read: interns with hoes), use of smother and cover crops, movement of chicken and turkey tractors between rows, and heavy use of mulches, primarily shredded leaves sourced from this land and several local organic landscapers and neighbors.





for the greenhouses, furnaces and sophisticated ventilation systems, interior irrigation, and a wide array of plastic trays, containers and other seed starting materials. Many these plants ought not to be grown where they cannot grow on their own. Alfalfa and hay cultivation in the southwest, which due to the climate is needful of irrigation is a similar example.

Closely following the dictum of “Right plant, Right place” would push the farmer to grow only crops that can be seeded directly in the soil in spring (or the previous fall), can thrive on the typical rainfall of the growing region, are satisfied with the day lengths throughout the growing season, enjoy the basic mineral makeup of the local soil, are not a undue risk from pests and diseases common to the area and can live in a culture that suits the landscape. To match these qualities in an agronomic laboratory would be daunting, but look to the community living in and around the field and the answers are clear. The path of least resistance is found in following the leader, and our leader is God and the marvelous creation.<sup>19</sup>

The meaning made in following the principle of mimicking nature points to Christ’s teaching about the lilies. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” (Mt 6:28b-29) Mimicking nature tells us what was intended (or at least what is well-suited) for a specific place and time, and in this reveals occasions of sacramental encounter. Mimicking nature invites us to the practice of gratitude and kenotic submission as it is crystal clear that we, humans, do not know to do anything best. These

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<sup>19</sup> The corollary to “Right plant; Right place is that any plant that is not where it is needed is a weed, i.e. even the most rare and perfect orchid, if found growing in the infield of Fenway Park, is a weed.



practices are practiced agriculturally in learning what wants to grow and how it wants to grow where you are, and doing it. This includes cultivating your own tastes and diet to eat what is available locally and in season. In the words of Trauger Groh, “When we are in touch with the capacities and limitations of nature, this awareness spills over into other dimensions of life and helps establish balance and modesty.

### *Seeking Balance in All Things*

I wrote above that the river runs its crooked course to the sea because gravity is a very convincing force; rivers generally do not run straight on their own. However, humans can and do choose to make rivers run straight, or backwards, or up and over mountains and over hundreds of miles to hydrate cities of millions of people in desert climates. This is the story of Los Angeles and Phoenix, and in the age of climate instability and change, we must recall the near disaster that Atlanta nearly suffered in the droughts of 2009. These cities could not possibly ever be sustainable because they are propped up on a foundation that requires a constant input of vast quantities of energy. Energy required to build and maintain a massive infrastructure, and to continuously move essential inputs (in this case water) into the system. It is a house of cards teetering on the razor’s edge of a petroleum powered economy. We need balance.

Faulkner, Fukuoka and a host of others intimate a tenet of balance in terms of what is now known as the Precautionary Principle. This principle asserts that an action should not be taken (nor a chemical or process be introduced into the environment) until it is assured to cause no harm. A mural on Church Street in Cambridge, MA honoring





Rachael Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, includes the statement: “Indication of harm, not proof of harm is our call to action.”

So much balance is lost in agricultural (and all human involved systems) because some element is added, removed, or altered in a way or to an extent that causes ripples of consequences throughout the system, causing new problems that lead to increasingly invasive corrections and so on and so on. The loss of fertility in America’s bread basket began with the rampant extraction of minerals through irresponsible cultural practices, which in turn led to greater use of petroleum derived fertilizer to restore fertility. The fertilizers applied, NPK mixtures (salts which with prolonged use salinize the soil) and anhydrous ammonia (a deadly poison) increase mineral “fertility,” but in effect sterilize the soil, destroying the naturally occurring, fertility-regenerating soil-food-web, which leads to increased use of petroleum derived fertilizers to fill in gaps that healthy soil would normally fill. Had this process been vetted for its impact, short and long term, perhaps we would not be in such a pickle.

Fukuoka is cynically amused at the joy humans find in finding solutions to problems we ourselves have created. He equates accolades for powerful new insecticides invented to combat pests which have become problematic because plants are weak due to disrupted soil systems to a man who, after punching a hole in his own roof, is proud of himself for patching it to stop the rain from getting in.<sup>20</sup> It is non-sensical, but this out of balance nature is the root story of the so-called “Green Revolution” that has provided food for billions in the near term, but in doing this in the way it did, opened up Pandora’s

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<sup>20</sup> Fukuoka, 18.





box in the form of dead soils, ubiquitous ground water contamination by agricultural chemicals, crack-addict like dependency on petroleum and heavy traction, reduced nutrient density in all conventional food categories, epidemics of food bourne illnesses, particularly in meat products, and the great unknown of the introduction of genetically modified organisms, our contemporary version of the golem. We are out of balance.

A constructive way to understand balance as a principle of sustainable agriculture is found in the understanding of what a farm as an *individuality* truly is. The vitality and viability of any life form or ecology is largely dependant on the balance of its constituent parts. To be a healthy farm organism, this balance is extremely important and it is extremely manageable. In managing the relationship within and between animal husbandry activities, grazing pasture and crop cultivation on the production side, and forest, water, hedgerow and fallow land on the natural or regenerative side, human beings as custodians and farmers can help land achieve, maintain and increase balance, inherently increasing fertility.

An illustrative example of this balance is found in the livestock culture somewhat developed and certainly evangelized by Joel Salatin, the farmer made famous in Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. His Polyface Farm (The Farm of Many Faces), primarily markets beef, chicken, chicken eggs and pork, but Salatin, and others like him, usually refers to himself as a "grass farmer," meaning that the work he does he does for the soil and the grasses it produces because everything that he sells is made of grass. He recently refined his job description, saying, "These days when people ask me what I do for a living, I reply: "Mob-stocking herbivorous solar conversion lignified carbon



sequestration fertilization.”<sup>21</sup> That means he grows grass perfectly suited for everyone that lives at Polyface.<sup>22</sup>

I will not specifically defining the job description above, but will describe how Joel Salatin works towards balance on his farm through a rigorous system of rotational grazing, which with no surprise, uses the model of nature as its primary source document. Knowing that the great ruminant populations of the Earth (Bison, caribou, water buffalo) created billions of solar sourced calories by following the growing cycle of grasses, he endeavored to mimic this. Through years of observation and experimentation he learned when the grasses were most palatable and nutrient dense, at what point grass most benefited from grazing or mowing, and what made for the optimum daily pattern and timing of grazing. Taking what existed, he compromised and cooperated with his community to the benefit of all.

An important aspect of the great balance he achieved through this mimicry is in relation to a great challenge for any animal husbandry operation: poop. Animal waste is a terrific blight on communities hosting livestock in any quantity: it smells terrible, devastates the soil if not properly handled (which is prohibitively expensive to do in all but the smallest conventional operations), and when not properly handled assures the continuation of parasite cycles and a variety of animal and human diseases. Handling is a

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<sup>21</sup> Joel Salatin “Tall Grass Mob Stocking: An Aggressive Approach to Controlled Grazing” in *AcresUSA* 38, no 5 (May 2008), [http://www.acresusa.com/toolbox/reprints/May08\\_Salatin.pdf](http://www.acresusa.com/toolbox/reprints/May08_Salatin.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> This practice intimates another key agricultural principle “feed the soil, not the plant.” By feeding the soil, the grass thrives that provides the livestock everything it needs, a much more balanced, sustainable practice that the regimens of supplements and veterinary interventions of conventional livestock operations. See also: Joel F. Salatin, *You Can Farm: The Entrepreneur's Guide to Start & Succeed in a Farming Enterprise*, (Swoope, VA: Polyface, 1998).; Joel F. Salatin, *Pastured Poultry Profits* (Swoope, VA: Polyface, 1996); Joel F. Salatin, *Salad Bar Beef*, (Swoope, VA: Polyface, 1996).





critical limiting factor because it is difficult and expensive to do by the nature and consistency of manure, and it must be handled in conventional cultures because the animals are concentrated in confined areas: manure needs to be removed.

Salatin's program uses portable, solar-powered electric fences to move cows from paddock to paddock within each pasture exactly as the pasture peaks in nutrition and palatability and is needful of grazing (grass ecosystems are dependant on grazing or fire to keep the system healthy...mowing is artificial grazing), and as soon as the required grazing is complete, the cows move to the next fresh paddock. The manure is spread by solar powered cows widely and naturally, and since the animals graze each plot generally only once per year, the parasites (worms) found in the cow pies have a high likelihood of not meeting another host cow before they die.

To this elegant balancing program is added another element also plagiarized from the book of nature. Following the great ruminant migrations were invariably flocks of birds who found a goldmine specifically in the form of parasitic worms in the aforementioned cow pies. To mimic this natural balance, and to deal with an other problematic manure management issue, Salatin follows the rotation of the cows with chickens. Meat birds housed in echelons of moveable, bottomless pens called tractors, and layers in moveable hen houses called egg-mobiles immediately follow the cows as the cows move to fresh pasture.<sup>23</sup> The chickens eat the worms out of the cow pies, and break up and scratch the pies, helping incorporate them into the soil. They tend to eat the leafy weeds and legumes that live low in the pasture cover, which increases airflow and

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<sup>23</sup> Pat Foreman and Andy Lee, *Chicken Tractor: The Permaculture Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil* (Burlington, VT: Good Earth Publications, 1998).



keeps the pasture healthy. All the while the chickens are leaving their own layer of manure behind them as their tractors or egg mobiles move each day. Chicken manure is very strong burning and killing plants exposed to concentrations of it, but a thin layer spread across the pasture day by day is gold. Add to this that pasture rotated chickens require a smaller grain ration due to their foraging (perhaps 20% less), and that this diverse diet makes for the most brilliantly orange-yellow egg yolks and there is not a possible argument against a system such as this.

The meaning made in applying the principle of balance, of which the above is only a minute example, is the corrective to Mae West's adage; too much of a good thing can be wonderful. The practice of balance teaches us that too much of a good thing, is just too much. Sure, 25-25-25 fertilizer is available, but if you only need 7-2-4 and a little calcium added to the soil to provide balance, the former is just too much and will cause problems.<sup>24</sup> While it is a semantic issue, the key is too much. It may be impossible to love too much, but if it were, then it would still be too much.

Nature provides us a template to follow, this is the lesson of mimicry, but where the example of nature is opaque, or the needs of some part of the farm community (which more often than not are the human needs) stray from what is typical for the time and place, then seeking balance, not too much of anything, no matter how good, is a middle path, mediating practice applicable to the fields in our charge and any other conceivable human activity.

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<sup>24</sup> The three numbers (25-25-25) refer to the percent content of Nitrogen (N), Potassium (P) and Phosphorous (K), collectively NPK, found in purchased fertilizers. The higher the number the higher the content of each element.





### *Plant Positive, Not Pest Negative*

The idea of being Plant Positive, not Pest Negative is somewhat narrow for inclusion in a list of meaningful meta-principles of sustainable farming, but I include it because it is not encountered widely in organic literature and it is a principle that I have found to be a potent mantra in my dealings with conflict I encounter in our potato patch, at the dinner table, in the vestry room and far abroad.

Eliot Coleman is a prominent farmer from the central coast of Maine and author of authoritative technical/how-to books of organic farming and gardening. In his very helpful book, *The New Organic Grower*, he synthesized this aphorism from a lifetime of reading and farming.<sup>25</sup> Plant positive, not pest negative means that if a plant (or person/family/community/nation...) is vibrant and healthy it will be impervious to pestilence. Any reasonable person's intuition will confirm this truth.

Agriculturally this translates into the knowledge that healthy plants (which result from healthy soil) are impervious to not only pestilence, but stress of any kind. This quote from a 1793 letter by Thomas Jefferson attests to the timeless truth of this idea,

“When earth is rich it bids defiance to droughts, yields in abundance and of the best quality. I suspect that the insects which have harassed you have been encouraged by the feebleness of your plants and that has been produced by the lean state of the soil.”<sup>26</sup>

Where this principle transcends the diagnostic application is in how it shapes a response to adversity.

Coleman applies this wisdom as a means to address pest problems as they arise and

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<sup>25</sup> Coleman, Elliot *The New Organic Grower* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 1985), 172-89.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 174. Originally quoted from, R.C. Barron, ed. *The Garden and Farms Books of Thomas Jefferson* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1987), 156.





not simply as a theory of growing. He tells us to focus on the health of the system and not on the disease. If cucumber beetles are damaging your cucurbits, something must be wrong with the cucurbits: the problem is not that there are too many bugs. The solution might refer us back to right plant, right place (or in this case right plant, right *time*) and the planting or transplanting of cucurbits might be delayed until the normal season of cucumber beetles passes, or it might tell us to help the plants (remembering of course that we do not feed plants we feed soil). In each case, our focus of attention is on preserving and building health and not on finding better ways to kill those pretty black and yellow striped beetles.

No matter how splendidly a system is modeled and cared for, no matter how plant positive a grow is, problems happen. Last season saw a plague of late blight strike the tomato and potato crops of the Northeast. *Phytophthora infestans*, the fungus behind late blight caused the great potato famine in Ireland in 1740-1. Not only does it kill outright solanaceous plants (members of the nightshade family, most particularly tomatoes and potatoes), but when it infects the tubers, the potatoes themselves, they do not store over winter, meaning that the seed stock is destroyed. The rainiest June on record gave opportunity to a human propagated infection to gain a foothold, and as the spores of *Phytophthora infestans* are wind-borne, the disease spread rapidly and widely.<sup>27</sup> Everyone was at risk of not only acquiring the blight, but if it were present in a field, allowing it to spread to a neighbors farm.

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<sup>27</sup> Last year's blight is a lesson in balance as the infection was traced to an industrial scale greenhouse company in Louisiana that knowingly sold blight-infected tomato seedlings which were subsequently marketed throughout the Northeast through multi-national retailers such as Lowes and The Home Depot. Sin upon sin upon sin kept my wife from eating a single tomato from the Emery House fields last year.



I noticed black, slimy leaves on a few of our tomatoes in early July, but as busy as I was, I did not make much of it. Two days later an emergency flash email from the USDA about a pending storm of late blight made its way to me through several local organic organizations we belong to. We had it in our field from the very beginning, and at present there are no systemic fungicides available that are either organic approved or are something I would feel safe applying to our soil. I waited a bit, but each morning I found black, slimy leaves on more plants and fearing for our potato crop, a friend of mine, his five year old son and I spent an aggrieved afternoon pulling all of the tomato plants and cutting back the potato vines (which prevents infection of the tubers). As devastating as this was personally, since we do not depend on our tomato crop for our livelihood, it was not devastating to us financially as it was to many growers.<sup>28</sup> And while this was seemingly not a plant positive experience to those tomato plants, it in fact was if the horizon of life is further out than a single season. Culling sick plants is a positive response, as it weeds out the weak and maintains a healthful environment for the strong to remain strong. Removing those plants and disposing of them securely (not in the compost), was a step to ensuring clean soil for tomatoes this season and for years to come. Never once did I focus on killing fungus, for if that had been my desire, I would have either encountered deep disappointment or have made decisions about treatments that I may have regretted.

The meaning we can make out of plant positive not pest negative mirrors so many

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<sup>28</sup> Growers depending on a tomato crop for their livelihood were variously tempted to judiciously use non-organic fungicides, to fanatically adhere to bio-security measures to prevent people bringing the fungus on the farm (I was asked to not visit more than one farm due to our outbreak), and to face a long winter short on cash or carrying greater debt than they had hoped.





wholesome practices of life. A life desiring connection with God is best lived focused on God and love and light, not on evil and sin, though they must be considered. Children are better served when their inherent love-ability and loved-ness is emphasized as opposed to the sometimes constant stream of infuriating and stressful behavior that that display. The epidemic of drugs and violence in urban and rural communities is best addressed by increasing the health and well-being of the people, neighborhoods, aquifers and forests and not through hunting down and punishing those most overcome by the epidemic itself.

### *Harvest Only the Abundance*

The final principle I will lift up, I will do so only briefly, for while it is rarely spoken of, is self-evident. In any agricultural system it is imperative that only the abundance be harvested. We must never tap into the principal.

The French economist Andre Gorz applies a convincing socialist hermeneutic to ecological inquiry (and a convincing ecological hermeneutic to the critique of capitalism), as was mentioned in Chapter 2 where I compared solar energy to current labor and petroleum to dead labor concentrated in the form of capital.<sup>29</sup> Any system that involves the exchange of anything can be looked at through an economic lens, hence the notion of an “economy of God” that is found in Trinitarian theology. A community, any community, has stores of wealth that it retains and requires for survival. This is the principal, and it may be in the form of the lives of its members, genetic information, accumulated, improved or created material, capacity for creativity, and more amorphous

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<sup>29</sup> Andre Gorz, *Capitalism Socialism Ecology*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1994).



forms of wealth such as networks of relationships, memories, traditions and stories, knowledge and ideas, sacredness, and the gift of being itself. To be certain, not all wealth is capital wealth.

If the principal wealth of a community is pillaged, it is difficult for that community to survive, let alone thrive in a balanced equilibrium. The horrendous evil of slavery plucked generations of people out of their communities in Western Africa. To this day, those communities have not recovered from the theft of their communal wealth in the form of the bodies and lives of their people. And those who were stolen, who became the “wealth” of another people, have not recovered, hence the continued fragmentation of African American culture or the continued plight in Haiti.

The principal wealth of the communities of Western Africa would have been vast, the same quality and quantity of wealth in any community in any time. The abundance, that which could have sustainably left the communities, would have been in the form of lives of people with gifts to share with the world with their intellects and creative natures, in art and stories, food, fish and timber, minerals and finished goods made from these minerals. Keep what you need, store, share or sell what you do not; reinvest the difference. That is the formula for a sustainable economy for any community. But tap into the principal and devastation follows. The continued suffering of communities if not cultures found in Cambodia, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and the occupied portions of Palestine are equally demonstrative examples.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The oppressive violence of the State of Israel can similarly be traced to the horrors done to the Jewish people by over two-thousand years of Christian enmity and persecution culminating in the Holocaust. It has then be exacerbated by sixty years in the role of occupiers in Palestine. Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate*





Soil is a community just like any other, made up of tremendously complex relationships and infinitely precise yet resilient balances. When soil is healthy, either through natural (unplanned) conditions or the work of sacramentally mindful custodians of ecosystems following the path of least resistance, it is wealthy and it has a lot to share, sell and store. This is our breadbasket. We invest in this community to make it healthier and healthier so its principal wealth increases and in time the amount it has in abundance to share, sell or store grows, even thirty-fold, sixty-fold or one hundred-fold.

The principal wealth of the soil is perhaps best referred to simply as its fertility, that is its ability support life. Fertility is *not* reported on a soil test report as ppm of NPK or as cation exchange capacity (cec), though those may be signs of balance and health, nor is it related to a soil's ability to produce a specific crop that suits only the needs of humanity. The soils undergirding tropical rain forests support volumes of life surpassed by no other ecosystem known on earth.<sup>31</sup> However, when tampered with, such as what happens when forests are clear cut for timber at to make room for cattle and their corn, the balance is disrupted, and a soil capable of supporting incredible volumes and varieties of life can only support corn for two or three seasons before yields drop precipitously. The two forms of wealth of the rain forest community valued by humans, timber and acreage, cannot be harvested in a way that allows the forest community to survive in any

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Enemy is an enlightening study of the ills suffered in oppressive systems by the oppressor class itself. See: Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> Tropical rain forests are tied with swamps, marshes, estuaries and sea-borne attached algae for highest net primary productivity, each generating 9000 kcal/m<sup>2</sup>/year, compared to 5850 for a temperate rain forest, 2952 for agricultural land, 563 for open ocean and down to 14 kcal/m<sup>2</sup>/year for the extreme desert. Jacke, 31. (adapted from Edward Kormondy *Concepts of Ecology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976).)





way. McDonald's needs to find space for their cows somewhere else.

Our New England soils are not held in as fine a balance as tropical rain forest soils, but we must ever be mindful that the wealth we harvest is only the abundance, only what the community can afford to share, sell or store. This is the pearl of great price in agriculture, to help land help itself, help soil, forest, wetland and water communities return to levels of stability and balance that existed before humans began tampering with them. Once we do that, when we are patient enough to do that, then those thirty, sixty and hundred-fold increases in fertility are not just possible; on the path of least resistance they are inevitable. Letting the world be as it is, as it needs to be, as it wants to be: this is the will of God.

### **Efficiency, Productivity and *Reality***

Physical economies described with overt theological, spiritual or philosophical themes perpetually bear the label "idealistic." Above, I mentioned three major categories of critique of the *idealistic* approach to agriculture this thesis proposes; lack of efficiency, lack of productivity, and lack of realism. What follows are responses to these critiques, some of which will confirm suspicions that in my little world ideas trump *reality*, to which I respond, "How close to the true nature of things do you get before you settle and call what you see *reality*?"

Agricultural systems are economic systems of the first order. Sadly, free-market capitalists have colonized not only the word "economy," making it to universally imply a financial economy, but have also attempted to financialize any form of economy imaginable (think patenting of genes, intellectual property, ownership of natural



commons such as water).<sup>32</sup>

To this end, the idea of efficiency takes on an aura of penultimate importance when engaging economic systems, including agricultural systems. Efficiency invariably means production requiring minimal financial input in relation to the maximum financial value of the output: buy low, sell high; grow food cheaply, sell it expensively. Efficiency is all about how quickly and cheaply materials can flow through an economy.<sup>33</sup> Having the purpose of a rapid flow of materials through an economy in no way mirrors any system present in nature. Efficiency is not the issue; productivity is. Nature is conservative and nature is immanently productive, as we noted previously, uncultivated ecosystems regularly outperform cultivated ecosystems in terms of creativity.<sup>34</sup>

I directly answer the critique of sustainable agricultural system's lack of efficiency in two ways. First is the issue of using efficiency as a category of evaluation. Evaluating a system with a single lens, particularly a financial lens, is a non-productive and even destructive, because humans effort invariably bends towards the categories being evaluated. If you measure in terms of money, all you see will be money. Second, if efficiency is understood as the level of production in relation to the level of input (including calories expended in production), then sustainable agricultural systems are more efficient than conventional/industrial systems by an order of magnitude.

Sustainability is measured by the systems ability regenerate its own fertility while

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<sup>32</sup> Jeremy Rifkin's *Biosphere Politics* is a piercing critique of the enclosing of commons. Jeremy Rifkin, *Biosphere Politics: A New Consciousness for a New Century* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991). John Hart's *Sacramental Commons* offers a Christian Bioethics approach to the idea of commons. John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics (Nature's Meaning)* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> See David C. Korten, *Agenda for a New Economy* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Jacke, 31.





offering it abundance for harvest. The soil food web is a vastly more efficient system than a farmer with a sprayer.

As far as productivity is concerned, there is both a theological and an agricultural/ecological basis to contend that sustainable agricultural systems are superior to conventional systems. Theologically it is an issue of process. John Milbank observes, “A creature is not something that primarily is; a creature is something that primarily creates.”<sup>35</sup> The creative nature of living beings, communities, ecosystems, cultures is the *imago dei*. So, by productivity are we concerned solely with the number of calories produced per acre this season, or on the regenerative, vibrant, self-sustaining and increasing nature of the ecosystem that produces not only food, but also beautiful places; refuges for wildlife and humans; opportunities for meaningful work; preserves of open space and maintains the historical/cultural/economic fabric of a community? Read this way, sustainably managed farmland is spiritually more productive.

It is also economically more productive. Measured over time, the productivity of sustainably farmed systems is exponentially higher than conventionally farmed systems. This is the basis Sir Albert Howard’s epiphany regarding agriculture. Howard, a British agronomist who served as an agricultural advisor in colonial India, is recognized as a founding father of the movement to rediscover sustainable farming practices for the West.<sup>36</sup> Published in 1940, his *An Agricultural Testament* has risen to near scriptural prominence and importance in sustainable agriculture communities and is largely credited

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<sup>35</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 425.

<sup>36</sup> Howard also worked in and wrote about China and Rhodesia.



with the beginning of the rediscovery of traditional farming knowledge in the developed world. He writes,

“The agricultural practices of the Orient have passed the supreme test – they are almost as permanent as those of the primeval forest, of the prairie or the ocean. The small-holdings of China, for example, are still maintaining a steady output and there is no loss of fertility after forty centuries.”<sup>37</sup>

Farming with a time horizon of decades and centuries is not some iconic ideal to strive for, but should be understood as a critical goal and a necessary investment if we hope to continue as a species.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, per acre production of food stuffs is in fact higher on diversified farms, diversification being a prerequisite for a farm to be sustainable. Another way to say diversified is polyculture, meaning the cultivation of multiple species in a system as opposed to the normative industrial monocultures of just wheat, or just corn, or just lettuce. A polyculture will never produce as much per acre of a single crop as a monoculture, but the total caloric output of polycropped systems is higher.<sup>39</sup>

“You can’t feed the world with backyard chickens.”<sup>40</sup> An agent of our federal government began a class on pastured poultry with this unequivocal statement. My

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<sup>37</sup> Sir Albert Howard, *An Agricultural Testament*, (page 9) in the Soil and Health Library, <http://soilandhealth.org/files/QOXVbvoylM/010105.ag.test.pdf> <http://www.soilandhealth.org/01aglibrary> (accessed 13 November 2009). See also the F.H. King’s revolutionary *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, which Howard refers to extensively. F. H. King, *Farmers of Forty Centuries or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan*, (New York: Mrs. F. H. King, 1911).

<sup>38</sup> See Wendell Berry’s “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” at the end of this chapter. Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems: 1957 – 1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 151-52.

<sup>39</sup> Matt Liebman, “Polyculture Cropping Systems” in *Agroecology: The Science of Sustainable Agriculture*, ed. Miguel A. Altieri (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 206-8.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Darre, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Agent for Poultry, *Pastured Poultry Management*, New Entry Sustainable Farming Project’s Poultry School, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University, Grafton, MA, 9 July 2009.





response is that we cannot possibly feed the world with anything but backyard chickens if we have plans on surviving as a species that relies on agriculture for another forty centuries. The vast economies of scale of industrial agriculture has compromised virtually every component of the path of least resistance let alone a sacramental experience of the creation, perhaps most destructively in the United States by putting the responsibility for agriculture in the hands of two percent of the population. This puts too much land and too much work on those few people who must then resort to chemicals and heavy equipment to complete their tasks, and even worse, it denies access to the meaningful, creative, life-giving work of farming to millions of people.

No, we cannot feed the world with small poultry flocks, or ten acre diversified vegetable systems, or fifty acre horse and family powered grain farms run by only two percent of the population, nor should we,<sup>41</sup> but if twenty or thirty percent of our population returned to the farm, and they each endeavored to feed their own community there would be plenty of food, plenty of work and plenty of abundance for all. Maybe this is fantasy, that the basic cultural and demographic make-up of American society could shift Earthward, that people would reclaim the value of creative work where the whole body, mind and spirit is engaged, and the actual time and place we find ourselves in is recognized as being *a priori*.

It might be fantasy, but the laughing children with raspberry covered faces, the chatty moms with babies in slings sitting around a bucket of peas they are shelling, the

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<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the biggest fault in Professor Darre's statement is the stated goal of attempting to "feed the world." The sustainability of not only the farmland and rural communities in this country, but also in the countries where American grown food is distributed is deeply threatened by global food economies.





excited crowds flocking to farmer's markets, the two-year waiting lists for memberships at local community supported farms (CSAs),<sup>42</sup> and the experience of God in the midst of the work here at Emery House that our interns attest to tells me it is not fantasy. Human beings know what is real, we are graced with the ability to recognize the genuine article when we see it, and to gravitate to what is truly right and good and joyful. This is eschatological hope, and there is nothing more precious, important or useful, particularly when it comes to farming. Farming on the path of least resistance is living a prayer of eschatological hope.

I end with the words of Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmers Liberation Front," which summarizes the preceding thirty pages in fifty lines.

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.  
And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When they want you to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.  
So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.  
Denounce the government and embrace  
the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.  
Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

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<sup>42</sup> Community supported farms, an economic model of farming referred to as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), are characterized by a structure whereby community members purchase a share of the harvest of a farm, generally a diversified vegetable farm, at the beginning of the season, sharing the risk and providing startup capital for the farmer. More detail on this model of farming is found in the next chapter.



Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.  
Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.  
Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.  
Listen to carrion - put your ear  
close, and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.  
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.  
So long as women do not go cheap  
for power, please women more than men.  
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
of a woman near to giving birth?  
Go with your love to the fields.  
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is highest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and the politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> W. Berry, Collected Poems, 151-2.





## Chapter 4

### Helping the Land Help People Know God

You make grass grow for flocks and herds  
and plants to serve mankind;  
That they may bring forth food from the earth,  
and wine to gladden our hearts,  
Oil to make a cheerful countenance,  
and bread to strengthen the heart.

Psalm 104

The perfection of the Christian faith is that it posits relationship at the heart of all existence. God in God's self, the Triune experience of the Almighty is an experience of relationship; a swirling cloud of relationship, one flowing into the other in perfect and infinite unity through and with full personhood. And we, through the life and sacrifice of the Son are, on the temporal plane, invited back into right relationship with God through the mysterious activity of the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever.

What we as Christians are called to do is to return to a state of right relationship with God in Christ. We are to live in a state of agape with God and neighbor. There are as many paths to right relationship as there are human souls, but we are Christians, members of the body of Christ and are called in reconciled relationship with God not only as individuals but as a people, a church, a species. This requires practice. By putting ourselves in intentional relationships, we practice relationship as we would relate to God.

A catholic vision of Christianity is recognized most clearly by its sacramental approach to life found around the Lord's Table and in the other sacraments we have been graced with. Working with the land reveals the knowledge that the Earth offers a universal invitation to the practice of right relationship, for the Earth itself, each moment that passes in time and space, each plant and breeze and fall of rain is a sacramental occurrence. William Temple writes eloquently in *Nature, Man and God* of a sacramental universe, and our heritage as an incarnational people teaches us that this, this place, the creation, the physical world is an occasion of God's grace and peace and life, given freely as he gave his son freely, not without cost, but without regret.

The land we walk upon, the food we eat, the air we breath, the water we drink and bathe in; in all of this, we have the opportunity to experience our total and real immersion in God, the eternal and actual presence of God. When we endeavor to intentionally work in a community that recognizes the inclusion of thousands of species, and complex relationships beyond the scope of human conscious understanding, the opportunity to experience God in the here and now becomes more and more possible. This is God's invitation at Emery House, where together we can help the land, help people know God.

-Address by the author to the brothers of SSJE, October 23, 2008



With these words delivered to a gathering of the Brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in October of 2008, a project began to envision and enact a ministry in, for and with the complex ecological community that is Emery House. As has been lifted up at length throughout the preceding chapters, the richness and beauty of Emery House's 100 acres in West Newbury, Massachusetts can hardly be exaggerated.<sup>1</sup> Emery House is a retreat center, where people come to spend time immersed in the routine of the Brother's lives. This continuing round of prayer and community life of the Brothers of SSJE and ministry of hospitality that welcomes guests into the life here has further consecrated this place. The untold number of hours of prayerful intention radiating out from the cells, chapel and hermitages converge with this very particular place and with some harmonic resonance carve out of the business and bustle of the Boston metropolitan area a pocket of quiet where one might have the chance to discern the presence of God in places and ways that most of us do not have the opportunity to discern it. This has been the condition of Emery House since the Brothers received this property in 1952, and in particular since the chapel and hermitages were constructed in 1986 – 1987. It is good, here; very good.

I recently saw a bumper sticker fashioned after the ubiquitous "Life is Good" brand that carried the slogan, "Life could be better," followed by a picture of a windmill. Saying "Life is good," as a general statement of fact and as a report on Emery House is a

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of the property is included by the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) of the Massachusetts Division of Wildlife and Fisheries in its BioMap program as Core Habitat and Supporting Natural Landscape categories. Further, the north and east boundaries of the property, the Merrimac and Artichoke Rivers respectively are listed in NHESP's as a Living Waters Core Habitat and the entirety of the property is within the Living Waters Critical Supporting Watershed. See the NHESP's excellent interactive map of the Commonwealth at: [http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/nhesp/land\\_protection/biomap/biomap\\_home.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/nhesp/land_protection/biomap/biomap_home.htm)





truthful statement. That is could be better is equally as truthful. In the first chapter we explored the nature of the world. In the second, we considered how we have access to that nature. In the third chapter I offered principles by which that access may be facilitated, and in this final chapter I will draw a sketch of what one specific farm built on this theoretical foundation looks like. Chapter four describes the work and life of Emery House.

The process described in the following pages finds its source in an understanding of God and reality as described above, hence, the work we endeavor to do at Emery House is applicable very specifically to Emery House at this very specific time. What follows is not a program or prescription for establishing a religiously grounded sustainable agricultural system as a component of a religious community, retreat center or other church/faith-based ministry. I offer a glimpse of what we have done and hope to do first, to help myself make sense of the vocation of agricultural ministry I will soon be ordained to do, and put our work in alignment with the theological principles I try to operate by. Second, for those interested or involved in projects at the intersection of faith, theology and agriculture, I offer this as a witness to what can be done with the requisite will, energy and love, as a source of ideas for what could be possible and how, as a starting point for conversations where all may learn and deepen relationships, and a record of mistakes made, lessons learned and wisdom (hopefully) earned.

An important aspect of this project must be noted. The vision as laid out below was presented to the Society of St. John the Evangelist to help them understand the depth of the resource they have in Emery House as its stewards, and offer ideas about ministries that would help the community realize the potential of this place. As of the winter of





2010, the Society of St. John the Evangelist has not committed to any specific course of action at Emery House. This is to say that while aspects of this work have begun, I make no claim that the Brothers of SSJE have sanctioned, are in agreement with or even full knowledge of the vision as laid out below. I accept full responsibility for its genesis and shortcomings. What aspects of this vision that are blessed have arisen only out of deep and sustained prayer and a constellation of relationships in which I am grateful to be immersed. Windy, Hannah Maeve (Brigid, our youngest, has not had much to say, yet), individual brothers of SSJE, the Bishop of Massachusetts, past and current interns, many clergy of the Diocese of Massachusetts, friends, mentors, local farmers and people I meet seemingly everywhere I go who express genuine enthusiasm for this work and recognition of the presence of God here, in this work at this very time and in this very place. Land, like life, is a gift of God for the People of God, and the path to grow closer to God is theirs alone.

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The goal of any Christian ministry is the revelation of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is where union with God, knowledge of God, and participation in God, all in Christ occurs. In living at Emery House as the caretaker, caring for the buildings, the landscaped areas, lawns, trails, rock walls and forests, I came to sense a presence of God here, as Brothers and guests always have. As I learned more about landscape systems, received training in organic land care, and most importantly started a small (800 square foot garden) I was struck by two things. First, this land wanted to help. It wanted to be productive, useful and valued for its richness beyond beauty, integrated into systems; it wanted to be loved. Second, everyone who saw the garden, or saw a pregnant



Windy working in the garden, or were invited to have a tomato off the vine, or offered a jar of salsa verde from the tomatillo patch, was amazed. An energy began flowing around the garden. Retreatants would stroll through. Questions began to filter back to us through brothers about what was growing or what salad greens we had shared with the cellarer. The love of growing things that had died with our market garden in Amherst seemed to spring up in the midst of this little garden, and each evening as I walked through the rows, watering seedlings, harvesting kale for our dinner or some zucchini for the Brother's kitchen, what I felt of God in my work with this land became unavoidably palpable. The vision of God I worshiped, that divine web of relationship and intention, and life and death; the true nature of all of it happened nakedly in this little garden and everyone who came to the garden saw it happening, though most did not understand what they saw, could not explain what they saw, and knew that they could not participate in what they saw. What I saw was a way to fix this.

As it was, I was invited to expand a bit the next season. The garden doubled in size, the Society paid for everything we needed, and a bit more of my time during the day was spent with the vegetables. In return, the kitchen at Emery House had as many vegetables as they could use in the growing season, and as food grew in abundance, beyond the needs of this place, I began bringing shipments of produce to the main monastery in Cambridge. The chef appreciated fresh produce, the Brothers liked eating it, and they found that their guests were enthralled with the idea that the community had produced this food themselves. Back up at Emery House, people began to ask to help in the garden, ask for tips on growing their own food, ask about how this work here





intersected with what they read in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*<sup>2</sup> and what that had to do with their relationship with God, and sometimes they just asked for a bundle of collard greens to bring home with them. A circle was being closed; connections were being made; and, a vocation, not only my own, but of the land was being discerned.

God, through this particular portion of the creation, invited us to become prayerfully intentional about how we, the humans with power over this bit of land, relate to and cooperate with this little bit of land. The history of 370 (or so) years of farming, the evident excitement of people who witnessed even the small gardens, the growing groundswell of ecological consciousness in the church and mainstream culture, and the need for good, locally and sustainably grown food in the lower Merrimac Valley, in addition to the passion for this work re-awakened in my and my wife's heart and being kindled in the SSJE community, made wide the path to a vision of farming Emery House once again. This time it would be done intentionally to the Glory of God for the revelation of God's Kingdom. Helping the land help people know God became a visible goal.

## **The Farm**

The heart of the work resides in the work itself: the founding of a farm. I will discuss the farm planning process only briefly, because this aspect of the vision is terrifically specific to this time and this place. What will be of more use beyond the property lines is how community is formed and constructive relationships to this place, this work, and the abundance of the land are formed with people near and far.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).



The starting point of the farm is that it must be a sustainable system, meaning we must work within an economics of self sufficiency. Ecologically, a self-sufficient economy manifests as a system that regenerates itself wherefrom we harvest only the abundance, leaving the natural capital of the soils and waters, untouched. Financially, only one small factor of an economy, self-sufficiency is defined by a balanced budget. As a not-for-profit enterprise, instruments such as endowed funds, donations, and grants will contribute significantly to this category, but the primary engine of financial self sufficiency will be in the marketing of farm products. Though we do not have the acreage to even attempt complete energy self-sufficiency (and the actuality of bio-fuels as a sustainable alternative to petroleum is very questionable anyway), the solar, wind, geothermal and hydrological resources here are significant and in conjunction with our own firewood, we will strive for self-sufficient green housing, heat, hot water and electric services on the property. Lastly, we endeavor to be self-sufficient in terms of labor. A professional staff will be essential to the management of the system, and will be considered self-sufficient when the majority of staff effort is dedicated to managing the labor of guests, retreatants, volunteers, passer-byres, youth groups, and of critical importance, interns and seminarians who will be in long term working relationships with the land. An economics of self-sufficiency is an all-encompassing worldview, it is organic, relational, in full understanding that the work of a volunteer in harvesting potatoes has everything to do with our decision to not buy insect repellent at Wal-Mart, our donation of broccoli to a local church's meal program, and the Collect for Purity prayed at Mass every day at noon. Anything less than this depth of integration, or attempt at this depth of integration will be, in the end, unsustainable.





Ecological self-sufficiency is a much broader category than simply managing fertility.<sup>3</sup> This is the beginning of the path of least resistance, knowing what the land wants to do and is suitable to do. Much of what graces a farm with the conditions to bear agricultural production sustainably are beyond the powers of human intervention within a time horizon defined by a generation or two. The ratio of forest to open land, presence of surface and ground water, quality of soil, orientation of the land, its beauty, inviting-ness and links to a broader community are such unchanging conditions. When these conditions are present, the land is in a posture where it may be approached and worked with in the manner Rudolf Steiner meant in using the term “individuality.”

Emery House is richly blessed with the conditions required to nurture an “individuality.” Two thirds of the land is in reasonably healthy hardwood and pine forest while one third is open, a mixture of flat, well drained soils, decent by New England standards, well suited for vegetable production, and some hilled land, long in hay, perfectly suited to continue to produce hay with or without livestock in a grazing rotation.

Size is important, too. There is not too much land to manage with a modest investment in machinery and people, or through contracting local farmers, but there is enough to keep one honest, meaning that there is enough land to make very conservative rotations of land from production, to cover crop/grazing systems, to fallow states possible, even inviting, without issues of not having enough land in cultivation. With the variety of soils, well sized (not too small nor too large) fields, abundance of water and favorable slopes southward, Emery House is perfectly suited to sustain a widely diversified farm, sustainably producing most anything that can be grown in Northeastern

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<sup>3</sup> Though of course well managed system is regenerative, never requiring off-farm input. For an in depth historical vision of this concept from a pioneer of organic thought and practice, see F. H. King, *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1911).





Massachusetts in sufficient quantities to make this land and its human residents (Brothers, guests and staff) self sufficient. This place wants to be an individuality.

What is the land telling us it wants to do? For clarity, I will outline what the land is capable of supporting sustainably, and then follow with how these capabilities integrate, enable and invigorate the vision of total ministry here. The farm/business/ministry plan for the agricultural activities of Emery House is the development of a diversified farm, producing for the monastic community's consumption, farm use, market, and donation into the food security system, a broad selection of vegetables, pasture based animal products (in descending order of priority: honey, chicken eggs, turkeys, chicken meat, wool/meat from sheep, pigs, and cows, and milk from cows or goats), hay, cut flowers, dry beans, small grains (oats, wheat, rice, rye and barley), and from the forest, maple syrup, cultivated mushrooms, firewood and lumber.<sup>4</sup> This is a broad plan, but the beauty (and feasibility) is found in the integration of the parts.

As the sausage maker boasts of leaving no waste, this vision of a farm leaves also very little, as each aspect of the plan integrates into the larger system. The relational nature of the creation is intentionally demonstrated in this system. From bees we get honey; and we get a workforce of hundreds of thousands to accurately and effortlessly (for us) pollinate our crops. From growing small grains, we have oatmeal for our breakfast and fresh rolled oats to sell; wheat flour for the community's Eucharistic bread and dinner table, for sale as is or perhaps some day as bread (using our own eggs, honey and syrup) at the farm stand; and the residue of the grain harvest is used as mulch and bedding straw and fodder for the livestock. Sheep, after spending the winter eating this

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<sup>4</sup> Firewood will be reserved for Emery House use, with which we are already fully self-sufficient from windfall timber. I can imagine selective timber harvest for on property building projects and occasional sale of high value logs.



fodder, produce meat and wool moving across land in pasture that is resting from vegetable production. They mow the fields (important for aesthetics and pasture health) while processing fertility that they scatter in their urine and manure. The sheep (or cows) are followed across the fields by echelons of chickens in moveable pens called tractors, feasting on the intestinal worms left in the droppings (moving them from the parasite life cycle into the chicken breast or egg salad cycle), scratching the manure into the soil, and eating a variety of weed seeds and insects, some of which are pests. In keeping the property tidy and while wearing hats knitted from the sheep's wool, we process the many trees that come down each year into firewood, which is then used to heat buildings and green houses and boil maple sap into syrup. The branches are chipped for use as mulch in the landscaped beds and raspberry and blueberry patches, and as a growing medium for mushrooms cultivated in the woods. Of course the manure, animal processing waste, vegetable matter from the veggie fields, grain and bean chaff, kitchen waste, grass clippings and branches pruned from the landscaping are variously processed through a couple of pigs and/or a windrow composting program, which each year cycles right back into the soil and on into the plants and the animals, including us, that eat them. The complexity of these relationships are then compounded exponentially with the addition of the teenage youth group member who, after Mass and a lunch of salad greens that she harvested that morning, spends an afternoon talking about women, God and ministry with a 25 year-old intern on her way to seminary while sorting soybeans, all happening at a monastery. I cannot imagine a more rich convergence of invitations to encounter and participate in God. Many of these systems are not yet in place, but the organic foundation of the system is, and the road to that place is wider and more inviting each





day.

## **The Witness**

Land well cared for, food well raised and communities of people well nurtured and well fed are each noble fulfillments of God's mission in the world. At Emery House we endeavor to each of these ends; this physical work in the world is ministry, and my own vocation to priestly ministry will be largely satisfied in this mission work. Emery House, though, blessed as it is with the sacramental thinness of this land; the Religious, human and material resources we have been gifted with; and, the gathering of energy, enthusiasm and grace occurring at this very moment, is located in a moment in space and time where the land, her abundance and the communities she supports are converging and the Glory of God is obvious here. The gifts and responsibilities we have been graced with demands that the Word revealed in the work here be witnessed to the community outside of the farm, to the broader Church, and to the world at large.

To affect this missionary ministry of witness, we are in the process of developing an interconnected web of program and invitation that we hope will draw people and communities into the land-based community here and help people learn to see God more and more frequently and in places they may not have noticed in their own communities when they return home. Our missionary work falls under the following major categories:

1. Building Community with Food: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) at Emery House;
2. Learning and Living Together: The Internship;
3. *Ora et Labora*: Integrating Retreat Ministry;
4. If you build it... : Inviting the Community;



## 5. The Lord's Acre: Feeding the Hungry.

Each of these ministry areas are in their infancy or are still on the drawing board, but as time plods on season after season and the community of Brothers and their neighbors changes and grows, this basic structure will fan the fires of this place and this work and the good it could do is immeasurable.

### ***Building Community with Food: The CSA at Emery House***

Perhaps the most important innovation in the world of small farm economics over the past forty years is the concept of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).<sup>5</sup> Above, I highlight two key components of sustainability; financial and labor self-sufficiency. The engine of financial self-sufficiency is the market, selling produce, and the key source of labor of is volunteer. Applying the CSA economic model as the primary farm structure of Emery House, as we shall see, provides significant and integrated fulfillment of financial and labor requirements, while also providing invitations to build a community, opportunities for evangelism and education, and a lovely means to witness the work of SSJE, the Episcopal Church, and Jesus Christ in the world.

The Community Supported Agriculture model is simple. At the beginning of a growing season, individuals (or families) purchase a share of the produce of a farm for a season. This is distributed to the purchasers, usually called members, as a portion of each weeks harvest throughout the season. Usually members come to the farm and pick up a box or bag of pre-packed produce, or “shop” for what is available. For example, on a

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<sup>5</sup> Trauger Groh's *Farms of Tomorrow*, cited frequently in previous chapters, is primarily concerned with propagating farm systems resembling CSAs. It is an excellent natural philosophy of farm economics and a practical resource about CSAs. Trauger M. Groh and Steven S.H. McFadden, *Farms of Tomorrow: Community Supported Farms-Farm Supported Communities* (Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, 1990).





pick up day in August, each member might be permitted to take two heads of cauliflower, one pound of spinach, designated portions of other items and will probably be required to take five pounds of turnips. In urban areas farms establish drop-off sites where members meet their share each week, or in some cases, shares are delivered to people's homes. Most CSAs are founded around vegetable production, but variations on this theme include such production systems as grains, root cellared foods, flowers and even fish.

There are two primary benefits of this economic model. The first is a matter of practicality and justice. The CSA is a form of shared risk. As it is, if a vegetable farmer in a conventional market system suffers a catastrophic loss of any certain crop, they absorb the loss, as many did in 2009 when the late blight destroyed much of the organic tomato crop. If there are no tomatoes to sell, no money changes hands, and whatever investment was made in that crop is lost.

For a farm structured as a CSA, the tomatoes are paid for by the members before the season starts. When the late blight struck last year, members understood that if tomatoes could not grow here this year, then there were not any tomatoes in their shares. It takes the burden of risk off of the farmer and shares it with people who are willing to make a commitment of loyalty to local agriculture. In a culture that is increasingly claiming to value local farms, open space, ecological consciousness, and wholesome community activities, it is a matter of justice that the high risk/low margin financial landscape of small-scale agriculture be mediated if not outright shared.<sup>6</sup> And as with

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<sup>6</sup> Federal crop insurance, a program that pays for crop loss, is generally not available for vegetable growers, as this program focuses on protecting "strategic" crops. (Growers of winter squash and potatoes, as these are staple/storage crops may qualify). In 2001, Western Massachusetts was hit with a very rainy June and a smut, a form of fungal infection, ravaged tomato and tobacco fields as there are very closely related. Most tobacco farmers were enrolled in the crop insurance programs and had their losses covered. No tomato farmers were eligible.





everything else, it is all about relationship.

Not only does the CSA model provide a secure financial base for the farm system, but it also provides a secure community base in that a group of people are truly invested in the activities of the farm, and opportunities to bring intentionality to the development of community in a Community Supported Agriculture system abound. While finances are important to the Emery House project, they are not the *raison d'être*; the revelation of the Kingdom of God, which really only seems to happen in community, is, and the CSA model opens up nearly endless possibilities in this realm. As a fractal, the path into the how and why of this vision spiral inward.

The web of relationships enabled by the CSA model have two main aspects. First is the community formed by members. The second web is related to a major site of ministry here at Emery House, our internship program. The operation of a CSA makes our internship program more capable of attracting people with genuine interest in learning farming, for lacking financial resources, the only practical way to start a farm now is through a CSA model, so the opportunity to learn in a CSA modeled economy is critical to attracting serious apprentices, which we will explore directly.

### ***Learning and Living Together: The Internship***

Wendell Berry wrote, “The finest growth that farmland can produce is a careful farmer.”<sup>7</sup> With the verdant land of this place, the ancient community tradition of the Order, the self-evident excitement of the local community and growing excitement in the larger Church, Emery House is well situated to produce not only careful farmers, but also

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<sup>7</sup> Wendell Berry, “Prayers and Sayings of a Mad Farmer,” in *Collected Poems: 1957 – 1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 131.



faithful, integrated and mindful human beings and ministers of Christ. This is the heart of the Emery House Internship Program.

Organic agricultural internships (often called apprenticeships) have been a feature of the CSA movement from the beginning. Farmers get to invite excited and motivated people intimately into the farm systems, have the opportunity to pass on the craft of farming, sow the seeds of sustainable agriculture wider each season, and receive the blessing of very inexpensive labor in exchange for the opportunity to live, learn and work. Everyone wins in this system.

We do not offer a comprehensive agricultural apprenticeship at Emery House at this time, and I do not suspect that we ever will. This is not to say that interns will not depart with a wealth of agricultural knowledge and skills, they certainly will (and have), but the primary mission of our internship is not to form farmers so much as it is to form servant-leaders and disciples practiced in sacramentally encountering God in the world. To this end, the internship is structured around three pillars:

1. Learning sustainable agriculture through practicing sustainable agriculture;
2. Living in intentional, praying community; and,
3. Engaging in theological reflection and a process of individual discernment.

This model reflects the nature of this place and our work very well. Nothing happens in isolation, work, prayer, learning, eating, laughing, playing, resting, worshipping flow into each other, and we strive to make each day and each season flow as seamlessly for the humans here as it does for the plants and animals.

The internship program is inspired by a hybridization of agricultural apprenticeship programs, consolidated well in Miranda Smith's indispensable *The On-*





*Farm Mentor's Guide*,<sup>8</sup> and the growing movement of young adult service programs in the Episcopal Church largely supported by the work of Trinity Wall Street, a prominent Episcopal Church in New York City and encapsulated in the white paper "Inspired Lives."<sup>9</sup> In particular we have begun collaboration with "Life Together," a servant-leadership based young adult service program based in the Diocese of Massachusetts. The director of Life Together, the Reverend Arrington Chambliss and her associate, Jason Long, have been key inspirations and resources in the development of this program.

Our primary goal is to cultivate servant-leaders, faithful people following Christ's example not to be served, but to serve. (Mt. 28:20; Mk 10:45) Max Weber defined leadership as a moral act, and serving that which needs serving, be it a single person, a human community, a piece of land or all of these at once is a form of leading as a moral act. Servant-leadership is a distinct school of thought centered on living and serving God in the world and is built upon a framework called the "Transformational Paradigm," and is enacted through three central practices; *Communion* (Prayer and Practice of Presence), *Compassion* (Being Awake to Heart Connection), and *Co-creation* (Alignment with Divine Power and Purpose). The details of servant-leadership training is voluminous and is not critical to the description of our program at this time. For more detail on programs

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<sup>8</sup> Miranda Smith, *The On-Farm Mentor's Guide: Practical Approaches to Teaching on the Farm* (Belchertown, MA: New England Small Farm Institute, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Trinity Grants Program, "Inspired Lives: Young Adult Service Programs within and Beyond the Episcopal Church; a report prepared by Criterion Ventures," Trinity Church & St. Paul's Chapel, [http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/files/news/Inspired\\_Lives.pdf](http://www.trinitywallstreet.org/files/news/Inspired_Lives.pdf), (Accessed 17 June 2009).



of this form, see the excellent website of the Servant Leadership School of Greensboro, upon whose work our program is based.<sup>10</sup>

The work and life of the internship is guided by three covenants. At the beginning of the program, Brothers, staff and interns prayerful create, and throughout the program revise, the following documents: a community covenant, an individual learning and discernment covenant, and a rule of life. Each of these provides focus for the management of the program and for the participation within it by all involved. They serve to test that we are always focused on the mission, as we are always asking the question, “How does *whatever it is that we are about to do* fit into one of these covenants?”

The community covenant is a clear formulation and statement of expectations, both of management and interns, and addresses logistical concerns, structure of work, formation of community and means of conflict resolution, if not prevention. The individual learning and discernment covenant contains an understanding reached between management and the individual intern about their goals for being here and what they hope to learn and discern, and expresses a commitment by the management to enable the learning and discernment processes. The final covenant is a rule of life, which is processed as a community, but finds fruition in individual rules crafted by each intern that will provide a structure of spiritual and physical discipline for their lives during their time in the program.

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<sup>10</sup> Board of Directors of the Servant Leadership School of Greensboro, “A Christian Wisdom School,” Servant Leadership School of Greensboro, <http://www.servantleadergreensboro.com/> (accessed 9 November 2009).





## *Agricultural Learning*

I subscribe to the *Karate Kid* school of agricultural education: if you paint the fence enough you will learn all you need to know.<sup>11</sup> Clearly this is an exaggeration, but it does capture the spirit of the agricultural learning portion of the program, which is the understanding that we learn best through doing. This is applied in the basic formation of each day's activity, which is focused on the sustainable operation of a small, diversified farm, and the organic care for a one-hundred acre retreat center. We learn to farm by farming, and farming is what we are doing most of the time here.

As we do not require agricultural knowledge or experience to join the internship program, there is certainly a didactic portion of the training. Interns are asked to read books and articles about the practice of sustainable agriculture, each task we accomplish begins with teaching about the specific task as well as how it integrates into the system, and throughout the season formal classes or in-services are offered on technical, scientific and ecological issues that we encounter in the course of the work. Additionally, if an intern wishes to include more intentional or technical training about the practice of agriculture, opportunities for learning through a regional farmer training cooperative active in our area, the Eastern Massachusetts Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (emass-CRAFT).<sup>12</sup>

The agricultural learning portion of the program is enhanced by our belief that stakeholders are consistently better learners and workers, which leads us to tailor individual learning to the learning and discernment covenants mentioned above. If an

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<sup>11</sup> This form of teaching is formalized in the "Four-Step Method," a vocational/apprenticeship teaching model in use in Germany since 1919. See Miranda Smith's *The On-Farm Mentor's Guide*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> EMASSCRAFT, "EMASSCRAFT HOME PAGE," Eastern Massachusetts Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training, <http://www.emasscraft.org/index.asp>, (accessed 26 February 2010).





intern expresses great interest in grains, poultry management, carpentry, perennial flowers or any other category of work here, we try to put them in a position of responsibility in that system. For instance, an intern with interest in grains would be in charge of monitoring the grain, recommending cultural practices, planning the harvest and preparing the first fruits of that harvest for everyone to share. Naturally staff supervises and guides this learning process, but to the extent that the intern proves capable, freedom is given to take responsibility and act.

The work-learning convergence occurs not only in the fields, but also in the other work of the retreat center. Interns are tasked with maintaining the lawns, gardens, forests and buildings of the retreat center, which they accomplish while learning the fundamentals of organic land care and sustainable building principles. In the future the internship program may integrate even further into the Society's retreat ministry by taking on the management of the guest house and perhaps the food service as well. All in all, the work done on this place provides the energy that moves everything else along.

### ***Agricultural Learning: Intentional and Praying Community***

All of the work and learning detailed above takes place in the context of an intentional and praying community. The primary structure of intentionality is created and reinforced with the community covenant we all create at the start of the program, but the day in, day out life at Emery House is the practice.

The life is structured by the work and is based on the life of the community. Living and working in close quarters is complicated. Interns live in their own hermitages, share common space, and take the main meal of the day together at mid-day. Our work, though outside and uncramped, is invariably cooperative. The practice of



cooking for others (and eating their cooking), working, resting, playing and learning *together*, and cultivating an environment whereby communication is lucid and frequent makes the community healthy and resilient.

The best way we have learned to create conditions that can make the living situation we are in edifying is through cultivating a life of prayer. Each intern is asked to engage in at least thirty minutes of spiritual practice each day before work commences. We offer resources and guidance about spiritual practice, and this practice is incorporated in some way into each person's rule of life. Additionally, the community practices communal prayer in the form of either the Daily Office said together, or when a priest is available, daily Mass. We do not require our interns to be Episcopalian, or even confirmed Christians, but we do insist on an openness for exploring and participating in Anglo-Catholic piety and worship. Attendance at prayer and Mass is required.

### ***Agricultural Learning: Reflection and Discernment***

With structures of working, living and praying established, the final pillar of the internship program is needed to make meaning of it all. With the learning and discerning covenant as a guide in establishing goals, a prayer practice in place, and a rule of life guiding our days, we hope that reflection and discernment is integrated in all that we do, and we also build specific events and occasions into the life here to facilitate this process.

The presence of Brothers of SSJE is resource for this work beyond compare. Personal interactions, the modeling of their lives in community, their preaching and teaching from this context, and opportunities for individual spiritual direction from Brothers are some of the most appreciated fruits of this community as reported by former interns.





Interaction with the Society is formatted in two ways. First, interns participate in guided retreat days led by Brothers specifically for the program. The first retreat day is during our initial orientation, the second day after they arrive, and others occur throughout the season. Second, interns share worship and mid-day meals with the Society when Brothers are in residence at Emery House, and when they are not, join the Brothers in Cambridge weekly for Mass and a meal. These less formal interactions provide the basis for solid relationships to develop between members of the Society and the interns living among them. Lastly, each season a brother takes on the responsibility for the spiritual nurture of the interns. Time is carved out each week for individual meetings between the Brother and intern, and work on prayer practice, reflection on relationships with God and discernment of call and vocation can occur. This is a terribly valuable resource.

The final explicit opportunity for reflection and discernment is in the form of weekly theological reflection sessions conducted by Brothers or staff. Through reading eco-theological texts, sustainable agricultural texts (I can think of one eco/agro-theological text they might read this summer), or texts out of the book of nature revealed in the work of the week, interns will gather for a time of facilitated reflection. There will eventually be the possibility for interns to create a *blog* for our website, which would contribute to their process of reflection and meaning making in the midst of this experience.

Our prayer for this work is that people join our community, live, learn and work well and safely, discern the will of God in their lives and take that with them as they leave. But not everyone has six to nine months to commit, so we have created



mechanisms for other ways to participate in the life of Emery House.

### ***Ora et Labora: Integrating Retreat Ministry***

Emery House is a retreat center. Since the mid-1980s this has been the primary ministry of this place and the addition of agricultural operations will not change that. It will, however, give opportunity for the retreat ministry of the Society to incorporate the work of the land into their work of the spirit; work and pray.

We envision this integration of farm and retreat to in many ways mirror the non-retreat based agritourism industry. In this model, small farms invite guests to come and have a farm experience as a vacation; a dude ranch with squash.<sup>13</sup> Guests could be perpetually invited to join the working community during individual retreat stays, or guided work-prayer retreats could be offered, with prayer and reflection being integrated into communal practice. This option could be enhanced with the work portion being focused on a specific task or event, such as working the wheat harvest from field to bread oven, praying with bees, or sheep shearing. Other thematic retreats around preserving the harvest, animal husbandry, cooking with seasonal food, processing poultry, sustainable forestry, woodworking, pottery and countless other topics could be fashioned and are sure to be popular enhancements to the retreat life the brothers already offer.

### ***If you build it... : Inviting the Community***

Integrating the existing retreat ministry would be an important aspect of maintaining a cohesive total ministry at Emery House. Another important mission of this place is the integration of the local community into the life of the land, as a place to learn

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Berst Adams, *The New Agritourism: Hosting Community and Tourists on Your Farm* (Halifax, NS: New World Publishing, 2008).





about the creation as sustainable agriculture reveals it, and as an occasion for evangelical witness by connecting this land to the life of God in Christ and the ministry of the Society, the Diocese of Massachusetts and the larger Episcopal Church. We are in the process of developing two initiatives to facilitate this outreach; an eco-agricultural education program and partnership with youth initiatives within the Diocese.

The Farm Based Education Association was formed with the understanding that a farm is a unique and desirable pedagogical platform. We at Emery House agree. Anticipating grant support from a national organization, we are developing a year-long cycle of learning opportunities here at Emery House. Offered through the CSA and to the general public, a monthly gathering will occur and a seasonal topic will be discussed, demonstrated, taught, shared, or in some other way offered in an educational context. We imagine maple sugaring, raising chickens in you back yard, building a compost pile, canning tomatoes, making lacto-fermented pickles and wildflower identification as possible subjects. Similar to the goal of the internship, we hope that people would leave with the ability to *do* something new, but more so, we hope people will leave with a deeper sense of integration, a larger understanding of the world, and a closer relationship with God.

We also hope to accomplish this through partnering with some of the various youth service organizations associated with the Diocese. Through designing day long service project opportunities and weekend or school vacation length working retreats, parish youth groups, Diocesan level organizations such as the Diocesan Youth Council, and Episcopal independent schools could be invited to participate in the work and life here. Of the many volunteer work events that we host here, without a doubt the most





successful, fun, productive, and invigorating experiences have been when youth were involved.

Additionally, in this diocese exist several summer programs for urban youth, which involve weekly excursions out of the city, usually in cooperation with suburban parishes. Emery House could be an excellent site for these young people to visit as we can open up to them a vision of the world that many have probably never experienced.

### ***The Lord's Acre: Feeding the Hungry***

The final program area under development involves involving the work of this land in supporting people without access to high quality, nutritious food. We have begun a partnership with Pettengil House, a social service provider in nearby Salisbury, Massachusetts, which involves the donation of CSA shares to families in the program. At this point, the shares are picked up by Pettengil volunteers for delivery to their clients, and we are working hard to invite these families into full CSA participation.

With the quantity of land at Emery House, ideas have circulated which could offer space and technical and/or material/mechanical assistance for poor members of the community to begin farm-based businesses, perhaps in conjunction with the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project at Tufts University. This organization provides support primarily for immigrant communities in accessing farmland, business and marketing planning, and adaptation of farming skills acquired in other climates and cultures. Another partnership opportunity could arise in construction of a Board of Health certified “clean kitchen” for processing food stuffs for sale which could be rented for little or no charge to needful people attempting to start micro-businesses (and would provide us the opportunity for adding value to our produce on farm).



This has been a brief overview of the life and work of Emery House. Not covered in the pages above any sense of the financial economy of the place, nor the capital investments required, income and fund raising projections (and requirements), legal or staffing issues. Similarly, I do not delve into the whole topic of my own priestly vocation which, thanks to (what will hopefully prove to be) the prescience of Bishop Tom Shaw and the Commission on Ministry in this Diocese, will be practiced in the fields and forests of Emery House, but those are just details.

The essence of this place is found in the living and breathing land that surrounds us here. This land wants to be a forest. It also wants us here. It tells us this in being so beautiful, in sharing so much of its inner wealth, in being as loveable as it is to the thousands of people who have intersected with it, in being a place where children, moms, dads and young folks, priests, bishops and monks, and folks who just happen by feel better than most other places. That is the voice of this land. That is the voice of God. Come and see us here. Everyone is welcome.





## Afterword

A cold rain has been falling all day and I have gotten a little soggy running back and forth every forty-five minutes to our maple syrup evaporator across the road. One of our interns has taken over as I finish this final section. Steam is billowing through the lowest branches of one of those 500 year old oaks and Windy is out with the girls so it is quiet, save for the splashing of raindrops on the windowsill.

In the busyness of life I sometimes forget how beautiful life is. Not just this place I find myself living in, but life, living things only for the fact that they are living. All of the writing above, theories and thoughts, plans and projects, they are not without meaning and are not without importance. Some of us cannot make sense of things without handrails put up to point us in the right direction, we just need to remember that they are only handrails, and it is the life, the true nature of things, God that we are here with.

We need the rain. While Philadelphia and the District of Columbia are enjoying another snow storm, I've only plowed snow once this winter. We need the rain. The growing season is nearing; our seeds are all in, we start plants on Monday, and we just filled our final intern slot. God willing, it is going to be a good season.



### *A Prayer for Fruitful Seasons*

Almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth: We humbly pray that thy gracious providence may give and preserve to our use the harvests of the land and of the seas, and may prosper all who labor to gather them, that we, who constantly receive good things from thy hand, may always give thee thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1986), 207.



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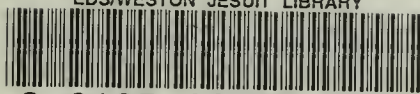








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